

The **FOURTH**  
**Time Travel**  
**MEGAPACK®**



**21 TRIPS THROUGH TIME!**

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# A NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Time travel remains one of my favorite subgenres in science fiction, and I'm pleased to have put together another volume of classic tales. From pulp adventure to literary gems, here are stories that range from the ancient past to the far future...20 in all, by masters of their craft.

Enjoy!

—John Betancourt  
Publisher, Wildside Press LLC  
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# TIME IN THE ROUND, by Fritz Leiber

Originally published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, May 1957.

From the other end of the Avenue of Wisdom that led across the Peace Park, a gray, hairless, heavily built dog was barking soundlessly at the towering crystal glory of the Time Theater. For a moment, the effect was almost frightening: a silent picture of the beginning of civilization challenging the end of it. Then a small boy caught up with the dog and it rolled over enthusiastically at his feet and the scene was normal again.

The small boy, however, seemed definitely pre-civilization. He studied the dog coldly and then inserted a thin metal tube under its eyelid and poked. The dog wagged its stumpy tail. The boy frowned, tightened his grip on the tube and jabbed hard. The dog's tail thumped the cushiony pavement and the four paws beat the air. The boy shortened his grip and suddenly jabbed the dog several times in the stomach. The stiff tube rebounded from the gray, hairless hide. The dog's face split in an upside-down grin, revealing formidable ivory fangs across which a long black tongue lolled.

The boy regarded the tongue speculatively and pocketed the metal tube with a grimace of utter disgust. He did not look up when someone called: "Hi, Butch! Sic 'em, Darter, sic 'em!"

A larger small boy and a somewhat older one were approaching across the luxurious, neatly cropped grass, preceded by a hurtling shape that, except for a black hide, was a replica of Butch's gray dog.

Butch shrugged his shoulders resignedly and said in a bored voice: "Kill 'em, Brute."

The gray dog hurled itself on Darter. Jaws gaped to get a hold on necks so short and thick as to be mere courtesy terms. They whirled like a fanged merry-go-round. Three more dogs, one white, one slate blue and one pink, hurried up and tried to climb aboard.

Butch yawned.

"What's the matter?" inquired Darter's master. "I thought you liked dog fights, Butch."

"I do like dog fights," Butch said somberly, without looking around. "I don't like uninj fights. They're just a pretend, like everything else. Nobody gets hurt. And look here, Joggy—and you, too, Hal—when you talk to me, don't just say Butch. It's the Butcher, see?"

"That's not exactly a functional name," Hal observed with the judiciousness of budding maturity, while Joggy said agreeably: "All right, Butcher, I suppose you'd like to have lived way back when people were hurting each other all the time so the blood came out?"

"I certainly would," the Butcher replied. As Joggy and Hal turned back skeptically to watch the fight, he took out the metal tube, screwed up his face in a dreadful frown and jabbed himself in the hand. He squeaked with pain and whisked the tube out of sight.

"A kid can't do anything anymore," he announced dramatically. "Can't break anything except the breakables they give him to break on purpose. Can't get dirty except in the dirt-pen—and they graduate him from that when he's two. Can't even be bitten by an uninj—it's contraprogrammed."

"Where'd you ever get so fixated on dirt?" Hal asked in a gentle voice acquired from a robot adolescent.

"I've been reading a book about a kid called Huckleberry Finn," the Butcher replied airily. "A swell book. That guy got dirtier than anything." His eyes became dreamy. "He even ate out of a garbage pail."

"What's a garbage pail?"

"I don't know, but it sounds great."

The battling uninjes careened into them. Brute had Darter by the ear and was whirling him around hilariously.

"Aw, *quit* it, Brute," the Butcher said in annoyance.

Brute obediently loosed his hold and returned to his master, paying no attention to his adversary's efforts to renew the fight.

The Butcher looked Brute squarely in the eyes. "You're making too much of a rumpus," he said. "I want to think."

He kicked Brute in the face. The dog squirmed joyously at his feet.

"Look," Joggy said, "you wouldn't hurt an uninj, for instance, would you?"

"How can you hurt something that's uninjurable?" the Butcher demanded scathingly. "An uninj isn't really a dog. It's just a lot of circuits and a micropack bedded in hyperplastic." He looked at Brute with guarded wistfulness.

"I don't know about that," Hal put in. "I've heard an uninj is programmed with so many genuine canine reactions that it practically has racial memory."

"I mean if you *could* hurt an uninj," Joggy amended.

"Well, maybe I wouldn't," the Butcher admitted grudgingly. "But shut up, I want to think."

"About what?" Hal asked with saintly reasonableness.

The Butcher achieved a fearful frown. "When I'm World Director," he said slowly, "I'm going to have warfare again."

"You think so now," Hal told him. "We all do at your age."

"We do not," the Butcher retorted. "I bet *you* didn't."

"Oh, yes, I was foolish, too," the older boy confessed readily. "All newborn organisms are self-centered and inconsiderate and ruthless."

They have to be. That's why we have uninjes to work out on, and death games and fear houses, so that our emotions are cleared for adult conditioning. And it's just the same with newborn civilizations. Why, long after atom power and the space drive were discovered, people kept having wars and revolutions. It took ages to condition them differently. Of course, you can't appreciate it this year, but Man's greatest achievement was when he learned to automatically reject all violent solutions to problems. You'll realize that when you're older."

"I will not!" the Butcher countered hotly. "I'm not going to be aissy." Hal and Joggy blinked at the unfamiliar word. "And what if we were attacked by bloodthirsty monsters from outside the Solar System?"

"The Space Fleet would take care of them," Hal replied calmly. "That's what it's for. Adults aren't conditioned to reject violent solutions to problems where non-human enemies are concerned. Look at what we did to viruses."

"But what if somebody got at us through the Time Bubble?"

"They can't. It's impossible."

"Yes, but suppose they did all the same."

"You've never been inside the Time Theater—you're not old enough yet—so you just can't know anything about it or about the reasons why it's impossible," Hal replied with friendly factuality. "The Time Bubble is just a viewer. You can only look through it, and just into the past, at that. But you can't travel through it because you can't change the past. Time traveling is a lot of kid stuff."

"I don't care," the Butcher asserted obstinately. "I'm still going to have warfare when I'm World Director."

"They'll condition you out of the idea," Hal assured him.

"They will not. I won't let 'em."

"It doesn't matter what you think now," Hal said with finality. "You'll have an altogether different opinion when you're six."

"Well, what if I will?" the Butcher snapped back. "You don't have to keep *telling* me about it, do you?"

\* \* \* \*

The others were silent. Joggy began to bounce up and down abstractedly on the resilient pavement. Hal called in his three uninjes and said in soothing tones: "Joggy and I are going to swim over to the Time Theater. Want to walk us there, Butch?"

Butch scowled.

"How about it, Butch?"

Still Butch did not seem to hear.

The older boy shrugged and said: "Oh, well, how about it—

Butcher?"

The Butcher swung around. "They won't let me in the Time Theater. You said so yourself."

"You could walk us over there."

"Well, maybe I will and maybe I won't."

"While you're deciding, we'll get swimming. Come along, Joggy."

Still scowling, the Butcher took a white soapy crayon from the bulging pocket in his silver shorts. Pressed into the pavement, it made a black mark. He scrawled pensively: KEEP ON THE GRASS.

He gazed at his handiwork. No, darn it, that was just what grownups wanted you to do. This grass couldn't be hurt. You couldn't pull it up or tear it off; it hurt your fingers to try. A rub with the side of the crayon removed the sign. He thought for a moment, then wrote: KEEP OFF THE GRASS.

With an untroubled countenance, he sprang up and hurried after the others.

\* \* \* \*

Joggy and the older boy were swimming lazily through the air at shoulder height. In the pavement directly under each of them was a wide, saucer-shaped depression which swam along with them. The uninjes avoided the depressions. Darter was strutting on his hind legs, looking up inquiringly at his master.

"Gimme a ride, Hal, gimme a ride!" the Butcher called. The older boy ignored him. "Aw, gimme a ride, Joggy."

"Oh, all right." Joggy touched the small box attached to the front of his broad metal harness and dropped lightly to the ground. The Butcher climbed on his back. There was a moment of rocking and pitching, during which each boy accused the other of trying to upset them.

Then the Butcher got his balance and they began to swim along securely, though at a level several inches lower. Brute sprang up after his master and was invisibly rebuffed. He retired, baffled, but a few minutes later, he was amusing himself by furious futile efforts to climb the hemispherical repulsor field.

Slowly the little cavalcade of boys and uninjes proceeded down the Avenue of Wisdom. Hal amused himself by stroking toward a tree. When he was about four feet from it, he was gently bounced away.

\* \* \* \*

It was really a more tiring method of transportation than walking and quite useless against the wind. True, by rocking the repulsor hemisphere backward, you could get a brief forward push, but it would be nullified when you rocked forward. A slow swimming stroke



was the simplest way to make progress.

The general sensation, however, was delightful and levitators were among the most prized of toys.

"There's the Theater," Joggy announced.

"I *know*," the Butcher said irritably.

But even he sounded a little solemn and subdued. From the Great Ramp to the topmost airy finial, the Time Theater was the dream of a god realized in unearthly substance. It imparted the aura of demigods to the adults drifting up and down the ramp.

"My father remembers when there wasn't a Time Theater," Hal said softly as he scanned the facade's glowing charts and maps. "Say, they're viewing Earth, somewhere in Scandinavia around zero in the B.C.-A.D. time scale. It should be interesting."

"Will it be about Napoleon?" the Butcher asked eagerly. "Or Hitler?" A red-headed adult heard and smiled and paused to watch. A lock of hair had fallen down the middle of the Butcher's forehead, and as he sat Joggy like a charger, he did bear a faint resemblance to one of the grim little egomaniacs of the Dawn Era.

"Wrong millennium," Hal said.

"Tamerlane then?" the Butcher pressed. "He killed cities and piled the skulls. Blood-bath stuff. Oh, yes, and Tamerlane was a Scand of the Navies."

Hal looked puzzled and then quickly erased the expression. "Well, even if it is about Tamerlane, you can't see it. How about it, Joggy?"

"They won't let me in, either."

"Yes, they will. You're five years old now."

"But I don't feel any older," Joggy replied doubtfully.

"The feeling comes at six. Don't worry, the usher will notice the difference."

Hal and Joggy switched off their levitators and dropped to their feet. The Butcher came down rather hard, twisting an ankle. He opened his mouth to cry, then abruptly closed it hard, bearing his pain in tight-lipped silence like an ancient soldier—like Stalin, maybe, he thought. The red-headed adult's face twitched in half-humorous sympathy.

Hal and Joggy mounted the Ramp and entered a twilight corridor which drank their faint footsteps and returned pulses of light. The Butcher limped manfully after them, but when he got inside, he forgot his battle injury.

Hal looked back. "Honestly, the usher will stop you."

The Butcher shook his head. "I'm going to think my way in. I'm going to think old."

"You won't be able to fool the usher, Butcher. You under-fives simply aren't allowed in the Time Theater. There's a good reason for it

—something dangerous might happen if an under-five got inside.”

“Why?”

“I don’t exactly know, but something.”

“Hah! I bet they’re scared we’d go traveling in the Time Bubble and have some excitement.”

“They are not. I guess they just know you’d get bored and wander away from your seats and maybe disturb the adults or upset the electronics or something. But don’t worry about it, Butcher. The usher will take care of you.”

“Shut up—I’m thinking I’m World Director,” the Butcher informed them, contorting his face diabolically.

Hal spoke to the uninjes, pointing to the side of the corridor. Obediently four of them lined up.

But Brute was peering down the corridor toward where it merged into a deeper darkness. His short legs stiffened, his neckless head seemed to retreat even further between his powerful shoulders, his lips writhed back to show his gleaming fangs, and a completely unfamiliar sound issued from his throat. A choked, grating sound. A growl. The other uninjes moved uneasily.

“Do you suppose something’s the matter with his circuits?” Joggy whispered. “Maybe he’s getting racial memories from the Scands.”

“Of course not,” Hal said irritably.

“Brute, get over there,” the Butcher commanded. Unwillingly, eyes still fixed on the blackness ahead, Brute obeyed.

The three boys started on. Hal and Joggy experienced a vaguely electrical tingling that vanished almost immediately. They looked back. The Butcher had been stopped by an invisible wall.

“I told you you couldn’t fool the usher,” Hal said.

The Butcher hurled himself forward. The wall gave a little, then bounced him back with equal force.

“I bet it’ll be a bum time view anyway,” the Butcher said, not giving up, but not trying again. “And I still don’t think the usher can tell how old you are. I bet there’s an over-age teacher spying on you through a hole, and if he doesn’t like your looks, he switches on the usher.”

But the others had disappeared in the blackness. The Butcher waited and then sat down beside the uninjes. Brute laid his head on his knee and growled faintly down the corridor.

“Take it easy, Brute,” the Butcher consoled him. “I don’t think Tamerlane was really a Scand of the Navies anyhow.”

Two chattering girls hardly bigger than himself stepped through the usher as if it weren’t there.

The Butcher grimly slipped out the metal tube and put it to his lips. There were two closely spaced faint *plops* and a large green stain

appeared on the bare back of one girl, while purple fluid dripped from the close-cropped hair of the other.

They glared at him and one of them said: "A cub!" But he had his arms folded and wasn't looking at them.

\* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, subordinate ushers had guided Hal and Joggy away from the main entrance to the Time Theater. A sphincter dilated and they found themselves in a small transparent cubicle from which they could watch the show without disturbing the adult audience. They unstrapped their levitators, laid them on the floor and sat down.

The darkened auditorium was circular. Rising from a low central platform was a huge bubble of light, its lower surface somewhat flattened. The audience was seated in concentric rows around the bubble, their keen and compassionate faces dimly revealed by the pale central glow.

But it was the scene within the bubble that riveted the attention of the boys.

Great brooding trees, the trunks of the nearer ones sliced by the bubble's surface, formed the background. Through the dark, wet foliage appeared glimpses of a murky sky, while from the ceiling of the bubble, a ceaseless rain dripped mournfully. A hooded figure crouched beside a little fire partly shielded by a gnarled trunk. Squatting round about were wiry, blue-eyed men with shoulder-length blond hair and full blond beards. They were clothed in furs and metal-studded leather.

Here and there were scattered weapons and armor—long swords glistening with oil to guard them from rust, crudely painted circular shields, and helmets from which curved the horns of beasts. Back and forth, lean, wolflike dogs paced with restless monotony.

\* \* \* \*

Sometimes the men seemed to speak together, or one would rise to peer down the misty forest vistas, but mostly they were motionless. Only the hooded figure, which they seemed to regard with a mingled wonder and fear, swayed incessantly to the rhythm of some unheard chant.

"The Time Bubble has been brought to rest in one of the barbaric cultures of the Dawn Era," a soft voice explained, so casually that Joggy looked around for the speaker, until Hal nudged him sharply, whispering with barely perceptible embarrassment: "Don't do that, Joggy. It's just the electronic interpreter. It senses our development and hears our questions and then it automats background and answers. But it's no more alive than an adolescent or a kinderobot. Got

a billion microtapes, though.”

The interpreter continued: “The skin-clad men we are viewing in Time in the Round seem to be a group of warriors of the sort who lived by pillage and rapine. The hooded figure is a most unusual find. We believe it to be that of a sorcerer who pretended to control the forces of nature and see into the future.”

Joggy whispered: “How is it that we can’t see the audience through the other side of the bubble? We can see through this side, all right.”

“The bubble only shines light out,” Hal told him hurriedly, to show he knew some things as well as the interpreter. “Nothing, not even light, can get into the bubble from outside. The audience on the other side of the bubble sees into it just as we do, only they’re seeing the other way—for instance, they can’t see the fire because the tree is in the way. And instead of seeing us beyond, they see more trees and sky.”

Joggy nodded. “You mean that whatever way you look at the bubble, it’s a kind of hole through time?”

“That’s right.” Hal cleared his throat and recited: “The bubble is the locus of an infinite number of one-way holes, all centering around two points in space-time, one now and one then. The bubble looks completely open, but if you tried to step inside, you’d be stopped—and so would an atom beam. It takes more energy than an atom beam just to maintain the bubble, let alone maneuver it.”

“I see, I guess,” Joggy whispered. “But if the hole works for light, why can’t the people inside the bubble step out of it into our world?”

“Why—er—you see, Joggy—”

The interpreter took over. “The holes are one-way for light, but no-way for matter. If one of the individuals inside the bubble walked toward you, he would cross-section and disappear. But to the audience on the opposite side of the bubble, it would be obvious that he had walked away along the vista down which they are peering.”

\* \* \* \* \*

As if to provide an example, a figure suddenly materialized on their side of the bubble. The wolflike dogs bared their fangs. For an instant, there was only an eerie, distorted, rapidly growing silhouette, changing from blood-red to black as the boundary of the bubble cross-sectioned the intruding figure. Then they recognized the back of another long-haired warrior and realized that the audience on the other side of the bubble had probably seen him approaching for some time.

He bowed to the hooded figure and handed him a small bag.

“More atavistic cubs, big and little! Hold still, Cynthia,” a new voice cut in.

Hal turned and saw that two cold-eyed girls had been ushered into the cubicle. One was wiping her close-cropped hair with one hand while mopping a green stain from her friend's back with the other.

Hal nudged Joggy and whispered: "Butch!"

But Joggy was still hypnotized by the Time Bubble.

"Then how is it, Hal," he asked, "that light comes out of the bubble, if the people don't? What I mean is, if one of the people walks toward us, he shrinks to a red blot and disappears. Why doesn't the light coming our way disappear, too?"

"Well—you see, Joggy, it isn't real light. It's—"

Once more the interpreter helped him out.

"The light that comes from the bubble is an isotope. Like atoms of one element, photons of a single frequency also have isotopes. It's more than a matter of polarization. One of these isotopes of light tends to leak futureward through holes in space-time. Most of the light goes down the vistas visible to the other side of the audience. But one isotope is diverted through the walls of the bubble into the Time Theater. Perhaps, because of the intense darkness of the theater, you haven't realized how dimly lit the scene is. That's because we're getting only a single isotope of the original light. Incidentally, no isotopes have been discovered that leak pastward, though attempts are being made to synthesize them."

"Oh, explanations!" murmured one of the newly arrived girls. "The cubs are always angling for them. Apple-polishers!"

"I like this show," a familiar voice announced serenely. "They cut anybody yet with those choppers?"

Hal looked down beside him. "Butch! How did you manage to get in?"

"I don't see any blood. Where's the bodies?"

"But how *did* you get in—Butcher?"

The Butcher replied airily: "A red-headed man talked to me and said it certainly was sad for a future dictator not to be able to enjoy scenes of carnage in his youth, so I told him I'd been inside the Time Theater and just come out to get a drink of water and go to the eliminator, but then my sprained ankle had got worse—I kind of tried to get up and fell down again—so he picked me up and carried me right through the usher."

"Butcher, that wasn't honest," Hal said a little worriedly. "You tricked him into thinking you were older and his brain waves blanketed yours, going through the usher. I really *have* heard it's dangerous for you under-fives to be in here."

"The way those cubs beg for babying and get it!" one of the girls commented. "Talk about sex favoritism!" She and her companion withdrew to the far end of the cubicle.

The Butcher grinned at them briefly and concentrated his attention on the scene in the Time Bubble.

"Those big dogs—" he began suddenly. "Brute must have smelled —."

"Don't be silly," Hal said. "Smells can't come out of the Time Bubble. Smells haven't any isotopes and—"

"I don't care," the Butcher asserted. "I bet somebody'll figure out someday how to use the bubble for time traveling."

"You can't travel in a point of view," Hal contradicted, "and that's all the bubble is. Besides, some scientists think the bubble isn't real at all, but a—uh—"

"I believe," the interpreter cut in smoothly, "that you're thinking of the theory that the Time Bubble operates by hypermemory. Some scientists would have us believe that all memory is time traveling and that the basic location of the bubble is not space-time at all, but ever-present eternity. Some of them go so far as to state that it is only a mental inability that prevents the Time Bubble from being used for time traveling—just as it may be a similar disability that keeps a robot with the same or even more scopeful memories from being a real man or animal.

"It is because of this minority theory that under-age individuals and other beings with impulsive mentalities are barred from the Time Theater. But do not be alarmed. Even if the minority theory should prove true—and no evidence for it has ever appeared—there are automatically operating safeguards to protect the audience from any harmful consequences of time traveling (almost certainly impossible, remember) in either direction."

"Sissies!" was the Butcher's comment.

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"You're rather young to be here, aren't you?" the interpreter inquired.

The Butcher folded his arms and scowled.

The interpreter hesitated almost humanly, probably snatching through a quarter-million microtapes. "Well, you wouldn't have got in unless a qualified adult had certified you as plus-age. Enjoy yourself."

There was no need for the last injunction. The scene within the bubble had acquired a gripping interest. The shaggy warriors were taking up their swords, gathering about the hooded sorcerer. The hood fell back, revealing a face with hawklike, disturbing eyes that seemed to be looking straight out of the bubble at the future.

"This is getting good," the Butcher said, squirming toward the edge of his seat.

"Stop being an impulsive mentality," Hal warned him a little

nervously.

“Hah!”

The sorcerer emptied the small bag on the fire and a thick cloud of smoke puffed toward the ceiling of the bubble. A clawlike hand waved wildly. The sorcerer appeared to be expostulating, commanding. The warriors stared uncomprehendingly, which seemed to exasperate the sorcerer.

“That’s right,” the Butcher approved loudly. “Sock it to ’em!”

“Butcher!” Hal admonished.

Suddenly the bubble grew very bright, as if the Sun had just shone forth in the ancient world, though the rain still dripped down.

“A viewing anomaly has occurred,” the interpreter announced. “It may be necessary to collapse the Time Bubble for a short period.”

In a frenzy, his ragged robes twisting like smoke, the sorcerer rushed at one of the warriors, pushing him backward so that in a moment he must cross-section.

“Attaboy!” the Butcher encouraged.

Then the warrior was standing outside the bubble, blinking toward the shadows, rain dripping from his beard and furs.

“Oh, *boy!*” the Butcher cheered in ecstasy.

“Butcher, you’ve done it!” Hal said, aghast.

“I sure did,” the Butcher agreed blandly, “but that old guy in the bubble helped me. Must take two to work it.”

“Keep your seats!” the interpreter said loudly. “We are energizing the safeguards!”

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The warriors inside the bubble stared in stupid astonishment after the one who had disappeared from their view. The sorcerer leaped about, pushing them in his direction.

Abrupt light flooded the Time Theater. The warriors who had emerged from the bubble stiffened themselves, baring their teeth.

“The safeguards are now energized,” the interpreter said.

A woman in a short golden tunic stood up uncertainly from the front row of the audience.

The first warrior looked her up and down, took one hesitant step forward, then another, then suddenly grabbed her and flung her over his left shoulder, looking around menacingly and swinging his sword in his right hand.

“I repeat, the safeguards have been fully energized! Keep your seats!” the interpreter enjoined.

In the cubicle, Hal and Joggy gasped, the two girls squeaked, but the Butcher yelled a “Hey!” of disapproval, snatched up something from the floor and darted out through the sphincter.

Here and there in the audience, other adults stood up. The emerged warriors formed a ring of swinging swords and questing eyes. Between their legs their wolfish dogs, emerged with them, crouched and snarled. Then the warriors began to fan out.

"There has been an unavoidable delay in energizing the safeguards," the interpreter said. "Please be patient."

At that moment, the Butcher entered the main auditorium, brandishing a levitator above his head and striding purposefully down the aisle. At his heels, five stocky forms trotted. In a definitely pre-civilization voice, or at least with pre-civilization volume, he bellowed: "Hey, you! You quit that!"

The first warrior looked toward him, gave his left shoulder a shake to quiet his wriggling captive, gave his right shoulder one to supple his sword arm, and waited until the dwarfish challenger came into range. Then his sword swished down in a flashing arc.

Next moment, the Butcher was on his knees and the warrior was staring at him open-mouthed. The sword had rebounded from something invisible an arm's length above the gnomelike creature's head. The warrior backed a step.

The Butcher stayed down, crouching half behind an aisle seat and digging for something in his pocket. But he didn't stay quiet. "Sic 'em, Brute!" he shrilled. "Sic 'em, Darter! Sic 'em, Pinkie and Whitie and Blue!" Then he stopped shouting and raised his hand to his mouth.

\* \* \* \* \*

Growling quite unmechanically, the five uninjes hurled themselves forward and closed with the warrior's wolflike dogs. At the first encounter, Brute and Pinkie were grabbed by the throats, shaken, and tossed a dozen feet. The warriors snarled approval and advanced. But then Brute and Pinkie raced back eagerly to the fight—and suddenly the face of the leading warrior was drenched with scarlet. He blinked and touched his fingers to it, then looked at his hand in horror.

The Butcher spared a second to repeat his command to the uninjes. But already the battle was going against the larger dogs. The latter had the advantage of weight and could toss the smaller dogs like so many foxes. But their terrible fangs did no damage, and whenever an uninj clamped on a throat, that throat was torn out.

Meanwhile, great bloody stains had appeared on the bodies of all the warriors. They drew back in a knot, looking at each other fearfully. That was when the Butcher got to his feet and strode forward, hand clenching the levitator above his head.

"Get back where you belong, you big jerks! And drop that lady!"

The first warrior pointed toward him and hissed something. Immediately, a half dozen swords were smiting at the Butcher.



“We are working to energize the safeguards,” the interpreter said in mechanical panic. “Remain patient and in your seats.”

The uninjes leaped into the melees, at first tearing more fur than flesh. Swords caught them and sent them spinning through the air. They came yapping back for more. Brute fixed on the first warrior’s ankle. The man dropped the woman, stamped unavailingly on the uninj, and let out a screech.

Swords were still rebounding from the invisible shield under which the Butcher crouched, making terrible faces at his attackers. They drew back, looked again at their bloodstains, goggled at the demon dogs. At their leader’s screech, they broke and plunged back into the Time Bubble, their leader stumbling limpingly after them. There they wasted no time on their own ragged sorcerer. Their swords rose and fell, and no repulsor field stayed them.

“Brute, come back!” the Butcher yelled.

\* \* \* \*

The gray uninj let go his hold on the leader’s ankle and scampered out of the Time Bubble, which swiftly dimmed to its original light intensity and then winked out.

For once in their very mature lives, all of the adults in the auditorium began to jabber at each other simultaneously.

“We are sorry, but the anomaly has made it necessary to collapse the Time Bubble,” the interpreter said. “There will be no viewing until further announcement. Thank you for your patience.”

Hal and Joggy caught up with the Butcher just as Brute jumped into his arms and the woman in gold picked him up and hugged him fiercely. The Butcher started to pull away, then grudgingly submitted.

“Cubs!” came a small cold voice from behind Hal and Joggy. “Always playing hero! Say, what’s that awful smell, Cynthia? It must have come from those dirty past men.”

Hal and Joggy were shouting at the Butcher, but he wasn’t listening to them or to the older voices clamoring about “revised theories of reality” and other important things. He didn’t even squirm as Brute licked his cheek and the woman in gold planted a big kiss practically on his mouth.

He smiled dreamily and stroked Brute’s muzzle and murmured softly: “We came, we saw, we conquered, didn’t we, Brute?”

# TRANSFER POINT, by Anthony Boucher

Originally published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, November 1950.

There were three of them in the retreat, three out of all mankind safe from the deadly yellow bands.

The great Kirth-Labbery himself had constructed the retreat and its extraordinary air-conditioning—not because his scientific genius had foreseen the coming of the poisonous element, agnoton, and the end of the human race, but because he itched.

And here Vyrko sat, methodically recording the destruction of mankind, once in a straight factual record, for the instruction of future readers (“if any,” he added wryly to himself), and again as a canto in that epic poem of Man which he never expected to complete, but for which he lived.

Lavra’s long golden hair fell over his shoulders. It was odd that its scent distracted him when he was at work on the factual record, yet seemed to wing the lines of the epic.

“But why bother?” she asked. Her speech might have been clearer if her tongue had not been more preoccupied with the savor of the apple than with the articulation of words. But Vyrko understood readily: the remark was as familiar an opening as P-K4 in chess.

“It’s my duty,” Vyrko explained patiently. “I haven’t your father’s scientific knowledge and perception. Your father’s? I haven’t the knowledge of his humblest lab assistant. But I can put words together so that they make sense and sometimes more than sense, and I have to do this.”

From Lavra’s plump red lips an apple pip fell into the works of the electronic typewriter. Vyrko fished it out automatically; this too was part of the gambit, with the possible variants of grape seed, orange peel....

“But why,” Lavra demanded petulantly, “won’t Father let us leave here? A girl might as well be in a...a....”

“*Convent?*” Vyrko suggested. He was a good amateur paleolinguist. “There is an analogy—even despite my presence. *Convents* were supposed to shelter girls from the Perils of The World. Now the whole world is one great Peril...outside of this retreat.”

“Go on,” Lavra urged. She had long ago learned, Vyrko suspected, that he was a faintly over-serious young man with no small talk, and that she could enjoy his full attention only by asking to have something explained, even if for the *n*th time.

He smiled and thought of the girls he used to talk *with*, not *at*, and of how little breath they had for talking now in the world where no one drew an unobstructed breath.

It had begun with the accidental discovery in a routine laboratory analysis of a new element in the air, an inert gas which the great paleolinguist Larkish had named *agnoton*, the Unknown Thing, after the pattern of the similar nicknames given to others: *neon*, the New Thing; *xenon*, the Strange Thing.

It had continued (the explanation ran off so automatically that his mind was free to range from the next line of the epic to the interesting question of whether the presence of ear lobes would damage the symmetry of Lavra's perfect face) it had continued with the itching and sneezing, the coughing and wheezing, with the increase of the percentage of agnoton in the atmosphere, promptly passing any other inert gas, even argon, and soon rivaling oxygen itself.

And it had culminated (no, the lines were cleaner without lobes), on that day when only the three of them were here in this retreat, with the discovery that the human race was allergic to agnoton.

Allergies had been conquered for a decade of generations. Their cure, even their palliation, had been forgotten. And mankind coughed and sneezed and itched...and died. For while the allergies of the ancient past produced only agonies to make the patient long for death, agnoton brought on racking and incessant spasms of coughing and sneezing which no heart could long withstand.

"So if you leave this shelter, my dear," Vyrko concluded, "you too will fight for every breath and twist your body in torment until your heart decides that it is all just too much trouble. Here we are safe, because your father's eczema was the only known case of allergy in centuries—and was traced to the inert gases. Here is the only air-conditioning in the world that excludes the inert gases—and with them agnoton. And here—"

Lavra leaned forward, a smile and a red fleck of apple skin on her lips, the apples of her breasts touching Vyrko's shoulders. This too was part of the gambit.

Usually it was merely declined. Tyrsa stood between them. Tyrsa, who sang well and talked better; whose plain face and beautiful throat were alike racked by agnoton.... This time the gambit was interrupted.

Kirth-Labbery himself had come in unnoticed. His old voice was thin with weariness, sharp with impatience. "And here we are, safe in perpetuity, with our air-conditioning, our energy plant, our hydroponics! Safe in perpetual siege, besieged by an inert gas!"

Vyrko grinned. "Undignified, isn't it?"

Kirth-Labbery managed to laugh at himself. "Damn your secretarial

hide, Vyrko. I love you like a son, but if I had one man who knew a meson from a metazoon to help me in the laboratory....”

“You’ll find something, Father,” Lavra said vaguely.

Her father regarded her with an odd seriousness. “Lavra,” he said, “your beauty is the greatest thing that I have wrought—with a certain assistance, I’ll grant, from the genes so obviously carried by your mother. That beauty alone still has meaning. The sight of you would bring a momentary happiness even to a man choking in his last spasms, while our great web of civilization....”

He absently left the sentence unfinished and switched on the video screen. He had to try a dozen channels before he found one that was still casting. When every erg of a man’s energy goes to drawing his next breath, he cannot tend his machine.

At last Kirth-Labbery picked up a Nyork newscast. The announcer was sneezing badly (“The older literature,” Vyrko observed, “found sneezing comic....”), but still contriving to speak, and somewhere a group of technicians must have had partial control of themselves.

“Four hundred and seventy-two planes have crashed,” the announcer said, “in the past forty-eight hours. Civil authorities have forbidden further plane travel indefinitely because of the danger of spasms at the controls, and it is rumored that all vehicular transport whatsoever is to come under the same ban. No Rocklipper has arrived from Lunn for over a week, and it is thirty-six hours since we have made contact with the Lunn telestation. Yurp has been silent for over two days, and Asia a week.

“‘The most serious threat of this epidemic,’ the head of the Academy has said in an authorized statement, ‘is the complete disruption of the systems of communication upon which world civilization is based. When man becomes physically incapable of governing his machines....’”

\* \* \* \*

It was then that they saw the first of the yellow bands.

It was just that: a band of bright yellow some thirty centimeters wide, about five meters long, and so thin as to seem insubstantial, a mere stripe of color. It came underneath the backdrop behind the announcer. It streaked about the casting room with questing sinuosity. No features, no appendages relieved its yellow blankness.

Then with a deft whipping motion it wrapped itself around the announcer. It held him only an instant. His hideously shriveled body plunged toward the camera as the screen went dead.

That was the start of the horror.

Vyrko, naturally, had no idea of the origin of the yellow bands. Even Kirth-Labbery could offer no more than conjectures. From

another planet, another system, another galaxy, another universe....

It did not matter. Precise knowledge had now lost its importance. Kirth-Labbery was almost as indifferent to the problem as was Lavra; he speculated on it out of sheer habit. What signified was that the yellow bands were alien, and that they were rapidly and precisely completing the destruction of mankind begun by the agnoton.

"Their arrival immediately after the epidemic," Kirth-Labbery concluded, "cannot be coincidence. You will observe that they function freely in an agnoton-laden atmosphere."

"It would be interesting," Vyrko commented, "to visualize a band sneezing...."

"It's possible," the scientist corrected, "that the agnoton was a poison-gas barrage laid down to soften Earth for their coming; but is it likely that they could *know* that a gas harmless to them would be lethal to other life? It's more probable that they learned from spectroscopic analysis that the atmosphere of Earth lacked an element essential to them, which they supplied before invading."

Vyrko considered the problem while Lavra sliced a peach with delicate grace. She was unable to resist licking the juice from her fingers.

"Then if the agnoton," he ventured, "is something that they imported, is it possible that their supply might run short?"

Kirth-Labbery fiddled with the dials under the screen. It was still possible to pick up occasional glimpses from remote sectors, though by now the heart sickened in advance at the knowledge of the inevitable end of the cast.

"It is possible, Vyrko. It is the only hope. The three of us here, where the agnoton and the yellow bands are alike helpless to enter, may continue our self-sufficient existence long enough to outlast the invaders. Perhaps somewhere on Earth there are other such nuclei, but I doubt it. We are the whole of the future...and I am old."

\* \* \* \* \*

Vyrko frowned. He resented the terrible weight of a burden that he did not want but could not reject. He felt himself at once, oppressed and ennobled. Lavra went on eating her peach.

The video screen sprang into light. A young man with the tense, lined face of premature age spoke hastily, urgently. "To all of you, if there are any of you.... I have heard no answer for two days now.... It is chance that I am here. But *watch*, all of you! I have found how the yellow bands came here. I am going to turn the camera on it now... *watch!*"

The field of vision panned to something that was for a moment totally incomprehensible. "This is their ship," the old young man

gasped. It was a set of bars of a metal almost exactly the color of the bands themselves, and it appeared in the first instant like a three-dimensional projection of a tesseract. Then as they looked at it, their eyes seemed to follow strange new angles. Possibilities of vision opened up beyond their capacities. For a moment they seemed to see what the human eye was not framed to grasp.

"They come," the voice panted on, "from...."

The voice and the screen went dead. Vyrko covered his eyes with his hands. Darkness was infinite relief. A minute passed before he felt that he could endure once more even the normal exercise of the optic nerve. He opened his eyes sharply at a little scream from Lavra.

He opened them to see how still Kirth-Labbery sat. The human heart, too, is framed to endure only so much; and, as the scientist had said, he was old.

\* \* \* \*

It was three days after Kirth-Labbery's death before Vyrko had brought his prose-and-verse record up to date. Nothing more had appeared on the video, even after the most patient hours of knob-twirling. Now Vyrko leaned back from the keyboard and contemplated his completed record—and then sat forward with abrupt shock at the thought of that word *completed*.

There was nothing more to write.

The situation was not novel in literature. He had read many treatments, and even written a rather successful satire on the theme himself. But here was the truth itself.

He was that most imagination-stirring of all figures, The Last Man on Earth. And he found it a boring situation.

Kirth-Labbery, had he lived, would have devoted his energies in the laboratory to an effort, even conceivably a successful one, to destroy the invaders. Vyrko knew his own limitations too well to attempt that.

Vrist, his gay wild twin, who had been in Lunn on yet another of his fantastic ventures when the agnoton struck—Vrist would have dreamed up some gallant feat of physical prowess to make the invaders pay dearly for his life. Vyrko found it difficult to cast himself in so swash-buckling a role.

He had never envied Vrist till now. *Be jealous of the dead; only the living are alone*. Vyrko smiled as he recalled the line from one of his early poems. It had been only the expression of a pose when he wrote it, a mood for a song that Tyrsa would sing well....

It was in this mood that he found (the ancient word had no modern counterpart) the *pulps*.

\* \* \* \*

He knew their history: how some eccentric of two thousand years ago (the name was variously rendered as Trees or Tiller) had buried them in a hermetic capsule to check against the future; how Tarabal had dug them up some fifty years ago; how Kirth-Labbery had spent almost the entire Hartl Prize for them because, as he used to assert, their incredible mixture of exact prophecy and arrant nonsense offered the perfect proof of the greatness and helplessness of human ingenuity.

But Vyrko had never read them before. They would at least be a novelty to deaden the boredom of his classically dramatic situation. He passed a more than pleasant hour with *Galaxy* and *Surprising* and the rest, needing the dictionary but rarely. He was particularly impressed by one story detailing, with the most precise minutiae, the politics of the American Religious Wars—a subject on which he himself had based a not unsuccessful novel. By one Norbert Holt, he observed. Extraordinary how exact a forecast...and yet extraordinary too how many of the stories dealt with space- and time-travel, which the race had never yet attained and now never would....

And inevitably there was a story, a neat and witty one by an author named Knight, about the Last Man on Earth. He read it and smiled, first at the story and then at his own stupidity.

He found Lavra in the laboratory, of all unexpected places.

She was staring fixedly at one corner, where the light did not strike clearly.

“What’s so fascinating?” Vyrko asked.

Lavra turned suddenly. Her hair and her flesh rippled with the perfect grace of the movement. “I was thinking....”

Vyrko’s half-formed intent toward her permitted no comment on that improbable statement.

“The day before Father...died, I was in here with him and I asked if there was any hope of our escaping ever. Only this time he answered me. He said yes, there was a way out, but he was afraid of it. It was an idea he’d worked on but never tried. And we’d be wiser not to try it, he said.”

“I don’t believe in arguing with your father—even post mortem.”

“But I can’t help wondering.... And when he said it, he looked over at that corner.”

Vyrko went to that corner and drew back a curtain. There was a chair of metal rods, and a crude control panel, though it was hard to see what it was intended to control. He dropped the curtain.

For a moment he stood watching Lavra. She was a fool, but she was exceedingly lovely. And the child of Kirth-Labbery could hardly carry only a fool’s genes.

Several generations could grow up in this retreat before the

inevitable failure of the most permanent mechanical installations made it uninhabitable. By that time Earth would be free of agnoton and yellow bands, or they would be so firmly established that there was no hope. The third generation would go forth into the world, to perish or....

He walked over to Lavra and laid a gentle hand on her golden hair.

\* \* \* \*

Vyrko never understood whether Lavra had been bored before that time. A life of undemanding inaction with plenty of food may well have sufficed her. Certainly she was not bored now.

At first she was merely passive; Vyrko had always suspected that she had meant the gambit to be declined. Then as her interest mounted and Vyrko began to compliment himself on his ability as an instructor, they became certain of their success; and from that point on she was rapt with the fascination of the changes in herself.

But even this new development did not totally rid Vyrko of his own ennui. If there were only something he could *do*, some positive, Vristian, Kirth-Labberian step that he could take! He damned himself for having been an incompetent aesthetic fool, who had taken so for granted the scientific wonders of his age that he had never learned what made them tick, or how greater wonders might be attained.

He slept too much, he ate too much, for a brief period he drank too much—until he found boredom even less attractive with a hangover.

He tried to write, but the terrible uncertainty of any future audience disheartened him.

Sometimes a week would pass without his consciously thinking of agnoton or the yellow bands. Then he would spend a day flogging himself into a state of nervous tension worthy of his uniquely dramatic situation, but he would always relapse. There just wasn't anything to do.

Now even the consolation of Lavra's beauty was vanishing, and she began demanding odd items of food which the hydroponic garden could not supply.

"If you loved me, you'd find a way to make cheese..." or "...grow a new kind of peach...a little like a grape, only different..."

It was while he was listening to a film wire of Tyrsa's (the last she ever made, in the curious tonalities of that newly rediscovered Mozart opera) and seeing her homely face, made even less lovely by the effort of those effortless-sounding notes, that he became conscious of the operative phrase.

"If you loved me...."

"Have I ever said I did?" he snapped.

He saw a new and not readily understood expression mar the



beauty of Lavra's face. "No," she said in sudden surprise. "No," and her voice fell to flatness, "you haven't...."

And as her sobs—the first he had ever heard from her—traveled away toward the hydroponic room, he felt a new and not readily understood emotion. He switched off the film wire midway through the pyrotechnic rage of the eighteenth-century queen of darkness.

\* \* \* \*

Vyrko found a curious refuge in the *pulps*. There was a perverse satisfaction in reading the thrilling exploits of other Last Men on Earth. He could feel through them the emotions that he should be feeling directly. And the other stories were fun, too, in varying ways. For instance, that astonishingly accurate account of the delicate maneuvering which averted what threatened to be the first and final Atomic War....

He noticed one oddity: Every absolutely correct story of the "future" bore the same by-line. Occasionally other writers made good guesses, predicted logical trends, foresaw inevitable extrapolations. But only Norbert Holt named names and dated dates with perfect historical accuracy.

It wasn't possible. It was too precise to be plausible. It was far more spectacular than the erratic Nostradamus often discussed in the *pulps*.

But there it was. He had read the Holt stories solidly through in order a half-dozen times, without finding a single flaw, when he discovered the copy of *Surprising Stories* that had slipped behind a shelf and was therefore new to him.

He looked at once at the contents page. Yes, there was a Holt and—he felt a twinge of irrational but poignant sadness—one labeled as posthumous.

This story, we regret to tell you, is incomplete, and not only because of Norbert Holt's tragic death last month. This is the last in chronological order of Holt's stories of a consistently plotted future; but this fragment was written before his masterpiece, *The Siege of Lunn*. Holt himself used to tell me that he could never finish it, that he could not find an ending; and he died still not knowing how *The Last Boredom* came out. But here, even though in fragment form, is the last published work of the greatest writer about the future, Norbert Holt.

The note was signed with the initials M. S. Vyrko had long sensed a more than professional intimacy between Holt and his editor, Manning Stern; this obituary introduction must have been a bitter task. But his eyes were hurrying on, almost fearfully, to the first words of *The Lost Boredom*:

There were three of them in the retreat, three out of all mankind safe from the deadly yellow bands. The great Kirth-Labbery himself had constructed....

Vyrko blinked and started again. It still read the same. He took firm hold of the magazine, as though the miracle might slip between his fingers, and dashed off with more energy than he had felt in months.

\* \* \* \*

He found Lavra in the hydroponic room. "I have just found," he shouted, "the damnedest unbelievable—"

"Darling," said Lavra, "I want some meat."

"Don't be silly. We haven't any meat. Nobody's eaten meat except at ritual dinners for generations."

"Then I want a ritual dinner."

"You can go on wanting. But look at this! Just read those first lines!"

"Vyrko," she pleaded, "I *want* it."

"Don't be an idiot!"

Her lips pouted and her eyes moistened. "Vyrko dear.... What you said when you were listening to that funny music.... Don't you love me?"

"No," he barked.

Her eyes overflowed. "You don't love me? Not after...?"

All Vyrko's pent-up boredom and irritation erupted. "You're beautiful, Lavra, or you were a few months ago, but you're an idiot. I am not in the habit of loving idiots."

"But you...."

"I tried to assure the perpetuation of the race—questionable though the desirability of such a project seems at the moment. It was not an unpleasant task, but I'm damned if it gives you the right in perpetuity to pester me."

She moaned a little as he slammed out of the room. He felt oddly better. Adrenalin is a fine thing for the system. He settled into a chair and resolutely read, his eyes bugging like a cover-monster's with amazed disbelief. When he reached the verbatim account of the quarrel he had just enjoyed, he dropped the magazine.

It sounded so petty in print. Such stupid inane bickering in the face of.... He left the magazine lying there and went back to the hydroponic room.

Lavra was crying—noiselessly this time, which somehow made it worse. One hand had automatically plucked a ripe grape, but she was not eating it. He went up behind her and slipped his hand under her long hair and began stroking the nape of her neck. The soundless sobs diminished gradually. When his fingers moved tenderly behind her

ears, she turned to him with parted lips. The grape fell from her hand.

"I'm sorry," he heard himself saying. "It's me that's the idiot. Which, I repeat, I am not in the habit of loving. And you're the mother of my twins and I do love you...." And he realized that the statement was quite possibly, if absurdly, true.

"I don't want anything now," Lavra said when words were again in order. She stretched contentedly, and she was still beautiful even in the ungainly distortion which might preserve a race. "Now what were you trying to tell me?"

\* \* \* \*

He explained. "And this Holt is always right," he ended. "And now he's writing about us!"

"Oh! Oh, then we'll know—"

"We'll know everything. We'll know what the yellow bands are and what becomes of them and what happens to mankind and—"

"—and we'll know," said Lavra, "whether it's a boy or a girl."

Vyrko smiled. "Twins, I told you. It runs in my family—no less than one pair to a generation. And I think that's it—Holt's already planted the fact of my having a twin named Vrist, even though he doesn't come into the action."

"Twins.... That *would* be nice. They wouldn't be lonely until we could.... But get it quick, dear. Read it to me; I can't wait!"

So he read Norbert Holt's story to her—too excited and too oddly affectionate to point out that her long-standing aversion for print persisted even when she herself was a character. He read on past the quarrel. He read a printable version of the past hour. He read about himself reading the story to her.

"Now!" she cried. "We're up to *now*. What happens next?"

Vyrko read:

The emotional release of anger and love had set Vyrko almost at peace with himself again; but a small restlessness still nibbled at his brain.

Irrelevantly he remembered Kirth-Labbery's cryptic hint of escape. Escape for the two of them, happy now; for the two of them and for their...it had to be, according to the odds, their twins.

He sauntered curiously into the laboratory, Lavra following him. He drew back the curtain and stared at the chair of metal rods. It was hard to see the control board that seemed to control nothing. He sat in the chair for a better look.

He made puzzled grunting noises. Lavra, her curiosity finally stirred by something inedible, reached over his shoulder and poked at the green button.

"I don't like that last thing he says about me," Lavra objected. "I don't like anything he says about me. I think your Mr. Holt is a very nasty person."

"He says you're beautiful."

"And he says you love me. Or does he? It's all mixed up."

"It is all mixed up...and I do love you."

The kiss was a short one; Lavra had to say, "And what next?"

"That's all. It ends there."

"Well.... Aren't you...?"

Vyrko felt strange. Holt had described his feelings so precisely. He was at peace and still curious, and the thought of Kirth-Labbery's escape method did nibble restlessly at his brain.

He rose and sauntered into the laboratory, Lavra following him. He drew back the curtain and stared at the chair of metal rods. It was hard to see the control board that seemed to control nothing. He sat in the chair for a better look.

He made puzzled grunting noises. Lavra, her curiosity finally stirred by something inedible, reached over his shoulder and poked at the green button.

\* \* \* \*

Vyrko had no time for amazement when Lavra and the laboratory vanished. He saw the archaic vehicle bearing down directly upon him and tried to get out of the way as rapidly as possible. But the chair hampered him and before he could get to his feet the vehicle struck. There was a red explosion of pain and then a long blackness.

He later recalled a moment of consciousness at the hospital and a shrill female voice repeating over and over, "But he wasn't there and then all of a sudden he was and I hit him. It was like he came out of nowhere. He wasn't there and all of a sudden...." Then the blackness came back.

All the time of his unconsciousness, all through the semi-conscious nightmares while doctors probed at him and his fever soared, his unconscious mind must have been working on the problem. He knew the complete answer the instant that he saw the paper on his breakfast tray, that first day he was capable of truly seeing anything.

The paper was easy to read for a paleolinguist with special training in *pulps*—easier than the curious concept of breakfast was to assimilate. What mattered was the date. 1948—and the headlines refreshed his knowledge of the Cold War and the impending election. (There was something he should remember about that election....)

He saw it clearly. Kirth-Labbery's genius had at last evolved a time machine. That was the one escape, the escape which the scientist had

not yet tested and rather distrusted. And Lavra had poked the green button because Norbert Holt had said she had poked (would poke?) the green button.

How many buttons could a wood poke poke if a wood poke would poke....

"The breakfast didn't seem to agree with him, doctor."

"Maybe it was the paper. Makes me run a temperature every morning, too!"

"Oh, doctor, you do say the funniest things!"

"Nothing funnier than this case. Total amnesia, as best we can judge by his lucid moments. And his clothes don't help us—must've been on his way to a fancy-dress party. Or maybe I should say fancy-undress!"

"Oh, *doctor!*"

"Don't tell me nurses can blush. Never did when I was an intern—and you can't say they didn't get a chance! But this character here... not a blessed bit of identification on him! Riding some kind of newfangled bike that got smashed up.... Better hold off on the solid food for a bit—stick to intravenous feeding."

\* \* \* \*

He'd had this trouble before at ritual dinners, Vyrko finally recalled. Meat was apt to affect him badly—the trouble was that he had not at first recognized those odd strips of oily solid which accompanied the egg as meat.

The adjustment was gradual and successful, in this as in other matters. At the end of two weeks, he was eating meat easily (and, he confessed, with a faintly obscene non-ritual pleasure) and equally easily chatting with nurses and fellow patients about the events (which he still privately tended to regard as mummified museum pieces) of 1948.

His adjustment, in fact, was soon so successful that it could not continue. The doctor made that clear.

"Got to think about the future, you know. Can't keep you here forever. Nasty unreasonable prejudice against keeping well men in hospitals."

Vyrko allowed the expected laugh to come forth. "But since," he said, gladly accepting the explanation that was so much more credible than the truth, "I haven't any idea who I am, where I live, or what my profession is—"

"Can't remember anything? Don't know if you can take shorthand, for instance? Or play the bull fiddle?"

"Not a thing." Vyrko felt it hardly worth while to point out his one manual accomplishment, the operation of the as-yet-uninvented

electronic typewriter.

"Behold," he thought, "the Man of the Future. I've read all the time travel stories. I know what should happen. I teach them everything Kirth-Labbery knew and I'm the greatest man in the world. Only the fictional time travel never happens to a poor dope who took for granted all the science around him, who pushed a button or turned a knob and never gave a damn what happened or why. Here they're just beginning to get two-dimensional black-and-white short-range television. We had (will have?) stereoscopic full-color world-wide video—which I'm about as capable of constructing here as my friend the doctor would be of installing electric light in Ancient Rome. The Mouse of the Future...."

The doctor had been thinking, too. He said, "Notice you're a great reader. Librarian's been telling me about you—went through the whole damn hospital library like a bookworm with a tapeworm!"

Vyrko laughed dutifully. "I like to read," he admitted.

"Ever try writing?" the doctor asked abruptly, almost in the tone in which he might reluctantly advise a girl that her logical future lay in Port Said.

This time Vyrko really laughed. "That does seem to ring a bell, you know.... It might be worth trying. But at that, what do I live on until I get started?"

"Hospital trustees here administer a rehabilitation fund. Might wangle a loan. Won't be much, of course; but I always say a single man's got only one mouth to feed—and if he feeds more, he won't be single long!"

"A little," said Vyrko with a glance at the newspaper headlines, "might go a long way."

\* \* \* \* \*

It did. There was the loan itself, which gave him a bank account on which, in turn, he could acquire other short-term loans—at exorbitant interest. And there was the election.

He had finally reconstructed what he should know about it. There had been a brilliant Wheel-of-If story in one of the much later pulps, on *If* the Republicans had won the 1948 election. Which meant that actually they had lost; and here, in October of 1948, all newspapers, all commentators, and most important, all gamblers, were convinced that they must infallibly win.

On Wednesday, November third, Vyrko repaid his debts and settled down to his writing career, comfortably guaranteed against immediate starvation.

A half-dozen attempts at standard fiction failed wretchedly. A matter of "tone," editors remarked vaguely, on the rare occasions

when they did not confine themselves to the even vaguer phrases of printed rejection forms. A little poetry sold—"if you can call that selling," Vyrko thought bitterly, comparing the financial position of the poet here and in his own world.

His failures were beginning to bring back the bitterness and boredom, and his thoughts turned more and more to that future to which he could never know the answer.

*Twins.* It had to be twins—of opposite sexes, of course. The only hope of the continuance of the race lay in a matter of odds and genetics.

Odds.... He began to think of the election bet, to figure other angles with which he could turn foreknowledge to profit. But his pulp-reading had filled his mind with fears of the paradoxes involved. He had calculated the election bets carefully; they could not affect the outcome of the election, they could not even, in their proportionately small size, affect the odds. But any further step....

Vyrko was, like most conceited men, fond of self-contempt, which he felt he could occasionally afford to indulge in. Possibly his strongest access of self-contempt came when he realized the simplicity of the solution to all his problems.

He could write for the science fiction pulps.

The one thing that he could handle convincingly and skilfully, with the proper "tone," was the future. Possibly start off with a story on the Religious Wars; he'd done all that research on his novel. Then....

It was not until he was about to mail the manuscript that the full pattern of the truth struck him.

Soberly, yet half-grinning, he crossed out KIRTH VYRKO on the first page and wrote NORBERT HOLT.

\* \* \* \* \*

Manning Stern rejoiced loudly in this fresh discovery. "This boy's got it! He makes it sound so real that...." The business office was instructed to pay the highest bonus rate (unheard of for a first story) and an intensely cordial letter went to the author outlining immediate needs and offering certain story suggestions.

The editor of *Surprising* was no little surprised at the answer:

...I regret to say that all my stories will be based on one consistent scheme of future events and that you must allow me to stick to my own choice of material....

"And who the hell," Manning Stern demanded, "is editing this magazine?" and dictated a somewhat peremptory suggestion for a personal interview.

The features were small and sharp, and the face had a sort of dark

aliveness. It was a different beauty from Lavra's, and an infinitely different beauty from the curious standards set by the 1949 films; but it was beauty and it spoke to Norbert Holt.

"You'll forgive a certain surprise, Miss Stern," he ventured. "I've read *Surprising* for so many years and never thought...."

Manning Stern grinned. "That the editor was also surprising? I'm used to it—your reaction, I mean. I don't think I'll ever be quite used to being a woman...or a human being, for that matter."

"Isn't it rather unusual? From what I know of the field...."

"Please God, when I find a man who can write, don't let him go all male-chauvinist on me! I'm a good editor," said she with becoming modesty (and don't you ever forget it!), "and I'm a good scientist. I even worked on the Manhattan Project—until some character discovered that my adopted daughter was a Spanish War orphan. But what we're here to talk about is this consistent-scheme gimmick of yours. It's all right, of course; it's been done before. But where I frankly think you're crazy is in planning to do it *exclusively*."

Norbert Holt opened his briefcase. "I've brought along an outline that might help convince you...."

An hour later Manning Stern glanced at her watch and announced, "End of office hours! Care to continue this slugfest over a martini or five? I warn you—the more I'm plied, the less pliant I get."

And an hour after that she stated, "We might get some place if we'd stay some place. I mean the subject seems to be getting elusive."

"The hell," Norbert Holt announced recklessly, "with editorial relations. Let's get back to the current state of the opera."

"It was paintings. I was telling you about the show at the—"

"No, I remember now. It was movies. You were trying to explain the Marx Brothers. Unsuccessfully, I may add."

"Un...suc...cess...fully," said Manning Stern ruminatively. "Five martinis and the man can say unsuccessfully successfully. But I try to explain the Marx Brothers yet! Look, Holt. I've got a subversive orphan at home and she's undoubtedly starving. I've got to feed her. You come home and meet her and have potluck, huh?"

"Good. Fine. Always like to try a new dish."

Manning Stern looked at him curiously. "Now was that a gag or not? You're funny, Holt. You know a lot about everything and then all of a sudden you go all Man-from-Mars on the simplest thing. Or do you...? Anyway, let's go feed Raquel."

And five hours later Holt was saying, "I never thought I'd have this reason for being glad I sold a story. Manning, I haven't had so much fun talking to—I almost said 'to a woman.' I haven't had so much fun talking since—"

He had almost said *since the agnoton came*. She seemed not to notice



his abrupt halt. She simply said “Bless you, Norb. Maybe you aren’t a male-chauvinist. Maybe even you’re.... Look, go find a subway or a cab or something. If you stay here another minute, I’m either going to kiss you or admit you’re right about your stories—and I don’t know which is worse editor-author relations.”

\* \* \* \*

Manning Stern committed the second breach of relations first. The fan mail on Norbert Holt’s debut left her no doubt that *Surprising* would profit by anything he chose to write about.

She’d never seen such a phenomenally rapid rise in author popularity. Or rather you could hardly say *rise*. Holt hit the top with his first story and stayed there. He socked the fans (Guest of Honor at the Washinvention), the pros (first President of Science Fiction Writers of America), and the general reader (author of the first pulp-bred science fiction book to stay three months on the best seller list).

And never had there been an author who was more pure damned fun to work with. Not that you edited him; you checked his copy for typos and sent it to the printers. (Typos were frequent at first; he said something odd about absurd illogical keyboard arrangement.) But just being with him, talking about this, that and those.... Raquel, just turning sixteen, was quite obviously in love with him—praying that he’d have the decency to stay single till she grew up and “You know, Mannigcita, I *am* Spanish; and the Mediterranean girls....”

But there *was* this occasional feeling of *oddness*. Like the potluck and the illogical keyboard and that night at SCWA....

“I’ve got a story problem,” Norbert Holt announced there. “An idea, and I can’t lick it. Maybe if I toss it out to the literary lions....”

“Story problem?” Manning said, a little more sharply than she’d intended. “I thought everything was outlined for the next ten years.”

“This is different. This is a sort of paradox story, and I can’t get out of it. It won’t end. Something like this: Suppose a man in the remote year X reads a story that tells him how to work a time machine. So he works the time machine and goes back to the year X minus 2000—let’s say, for instance, our time. So in ‘now’ he writes the story that he’s going to read two thousand years later, telling himself how to work the time machine because he knows how to work it because he read the story which he wrote because—”

Manning was starting to say “Hold it!” when Matt Duncan interrupted with, “Good old endless-cycle gimmick. Lot of fun to kick around, but Bob Heinlein did it once and for all in *By His Bootstraps*. Damnedest tour de force I ever read; there just aren’t any switcheroos left.”

“Ouroboros,” Joe Henderson contributed.

Norbert Holt looked a vain question at him; they knew that one word per evening was Joe's maximum contribution.

Austin Carter picked it up. "Ouroboros, the worm, that circles the universe with its tail in its mouth. The Asgard Serpent, too. And I think there's something in Mayan literature. All symbols of infinity—no beginning, no ending. Always out by the same door where you went in. See that magnificent novel of Eddison's, *The Worm Ouroboros*; the perfect cyclic novel, ending with its recommencement, stopping not because there's a stopping place, but because it's uneconomical to print the whole text over infinitely."

"The Quaker Oats box," said Duncan. "With a Quaker holding a box with a Quaker holding a box with a Quaker holding a...."

It was standard professional shop-talk. It was a fine evening with the boys. But there was a look of infinitely remote sadness in Norbert Holt's eyes.

That was the evening that Manning violated her first rule of editor-author relationships.

\* \* \* \* \*

They were having martinis in the same bar in which Norbert had, so many years ago, successfully said *unsuccessfully*.

"They've been good years," he remarked, apparently to the olive.

There was something wrong with this evening. No bounce. No yumph. "That's a funny tense," Manning confided to her own olive. "Aren't they still good years?"

"I've owed you a serious talk for a long time."

"You don't have to pay the debt. We don't go in much for being serious, do we? Not so dead-earnest-catch-in-the-throat serious."

"Don't we?"

"I've got an awful feeling," Manning admitted, "that you're building up to a proposal, either to me or that olive. And if it's me, I've got an awful feeling I'm going to accept—and Raquel will *never* forgive me."

"You're safe," Norbert said dryly. "That's the serious talk. I want to marry you, darling, and I'm not going to."

"I suppose this is the time you twirl your black mustache and tell me you have a wife and family elsewhere?"

"I hope to God I have!"

"No, it wasn't very funny, was it?" Manning felt very little, aside from wishing she were dead.

"I can't tell you the truth," he went on. "You wouldn't believe it. I've loved two women before; one had talent and a brain, the other had beauty and no brain. I think I loved her. The damndest curse of Ouroboros is that I'll never quite know. If I could take that tail out of that mouth...."

“Go on,” she encouraged a little wildly. “Talk plot-gimmicks. It’s easier on me.”

“And she is carrying...will carry...my child—my children, it must be. My twins....”

“Look, Holt. We came in here editor and author—remember back when? Let’s go out that way. Don’t go on talking. I’m a big girl, but I can’t take...everything. It’s been fun knowing you and all future manuscripts will be gratefully received.”

“I knew I couldn’t say it. I shouldn’t have tried. But there won’t be any future manuscripts. I’ve written every Holt I’ve ever read.”

“Does that make sense?” Manning aimed the remark at the olive, but it was gone. So was the martini.

“Here’s the last.” He took it out of his breast-pocket, neatly folded. “The one we talked about at SCWA—the one I couldn’t end. Maybe you’ll understand. I wanted somehow to make it clear before....”

The tone of his voice projected a sense of doom, and Manning forgot everything else. “Is something going to happen to you? Are you going to—Oh, my dear, *no*! All right, so you, have a wife on every space station in the asteroid belt; but if anything happens to you....”

“I don’t know,” said Norbert Holt. “I can’t remember the exact date of that issue....” He rose abruptly. “I shouldn’t have tried a goodbye. See you again, darling—the next time round Ouroboros.”

She was still staring at the empty martini glass when she heard the shrill of brakes and the excited up-springing of a crowd outside.

\* \* \* \*

She read the posthumous fragment late that night, after her eyes had dried sufficiently to make the operation practicable. And through her sorrow her mind fought to help her, making her think, making her be an editor.

She understood a little and disbelieved what she understood. And underneath she prodded herself, “But it isn’t a *story*. It’s too short, too inconclusive. It’ll just disappoint the Holt fans—and that’s everybody. Much better if I do a straight obit, take up a full page on it....”

She fought hard to keep on thinking, not feeling. She had never before experienced so strongly the I-have-been-here-before sensation. She had been faced with this dilemma once before, once on some other time-spiral, as the boys in SCWA would say. And her decision had been....

“It’s sentimentality,” she protested. “It isn’t *editing*. This decision’s right. I know it. And if I go and get another of these attacks and start to change my mind....”

She laid the posthumous Holt fragment on the coals. It caught fire quickly.

The next morning Raquel greeted her with, "Manningcita, who's Norbert Holt?"

Manning had slept so restfully that she was even tolerant of foolish questions at breakfast. "Who?" she asked.

"Norbert Holt. Somehow the name popped into my mind. Is he perhaps one of your writers?"

"Never heard of him."

Raquel frowned. "I was almost sure.... Can you really remember them all? I'm going to check those bound volumes of *Surprising*."

"Any luck with your...what was it...? Holt?" Manning asked the girl a little later.

"No, Manningcita. I was quite unsuccessful."

...*unsuccessful*.... Now why in Heaven's name, mused Manning Stern, should I be thinking of martinis at breakfast time?

# GUEST IN THE HOUSE, by Frank Belknap Long

Originally published in *Astounding Science Fiction*, March 1946.

Roger Shevlin set down his bags, shook the rain from his umbrella and wondered just how long it would be before he found himself consulting a psychiatrist. He'd made mistakes before—plenty of them. But he was essentially a man of sound judgment, and it was hard to believe he could have allowed himself to be talked into renting a twenty-room house.

He was amazed at his own incredible stupidity; the lack of judgment he'd shown right up to the instant he'd signed the lease and returned the pen to the renting agent with a complacent smirk.

A huge and misshapen ogre of a dwelling it was, with ivy-hung eaves and a broken-down front porch, and as Shevlin stood in the lower hallway staring up the great central staircase a shudder went through him. There was always a chance, of course, that the place would shed some of its ugliness amidst the changing colors of autumn and the sweet-warbled songs of meadowlarks and grasshopper sparrows.

But Shevlin knew that no one would ever refer to the place he'd leased as a "house." It would always be "that place the Shevlins settled in—the poor chumps!" or "Johnny, run over to the Shevlin place and see if Mrs. Shevlin has any butter to spare."

To add to Shevlin's woes, the children had brushed right past him, and were losing no time in making themselves at home. Children could take root and sprout almost anywhere and the Shevlin youngsters were hardy perennials six and nine respectively. Already the house was beginning to resound with yells, shrieks and blood-curdling whoops.

A man should be proud to be the father of two such sturdy youngsters, Shevlin thought, and glared at his wife.

"The place won't look half so bad when I get those new curtains ironed out and hung up," Elsie said, and could have bitten her tongue out.

"Thanks," Shevlin said, dryly. "I was waiting for that. Now, if you don't mind, I'll go down in the cellar and mix myself a rum collins."

"Why pick on the cellar," Elsie said, miserably. "There's nothing down there but a lot of rusty machinery which we'll have to pay someone to rip out and cart away. The renting agent said the last tenant was a professor of—what did he say he was a professor of,

Roger?"

"Of physics," Roger grunted. "Perhaps if I go down in the cellar and surround myself with just the right atmosphere it will work with me."

Elsie stared at him. "What are you talking about?"

"The homeopathic system of therapeutics," Shevlin said. "If you have something bad, you dose yourself with more of the same until it either cures or kills you."

A queer feeling of insecurity took hold of Shevlin when he saw the cellar.

It was damper than he'd ever thought a cellar could be. And chillier.

The machinery was damp, too. It was studded with little blobs of moisture and under the wetness was a rustiness which made Shevlin think of tin cans rusting in the sun, and an ax half-buried in a chopping block in an abandoned woodshed.

Ah, well—a gloomy life and a stagnant one was better than being cooped up in a city apartment with two small kids running around in circles every time the doorbell rang.

The machinery was really quite elaborate. So elaborate, in fact, that if Shevlin had been writing a book about machinery he'd have gone out and hired a ghost writer solely to avoid describing it.

Shevlin took another sip of the rum collins and wished that he were out of the cellar and upstairs in the attic. Of one thing he was certain. It would be sheer insanity for him to remain in the cellar when he could roam all over the house without let or hindrance.

Once as a child Shevlin had almost tangled with a bulldozer and the experience had left an ineffaceable impression on his mind. He had no intention of touching the machinery, or becoming embroiled with it in any way.

Clumsy hands he had. Clumsy hands and a clumsy head, early to rise and early to bed.

He must have stumbled, though it was hard to see how he could have been so unsteady on his feet after just one rum collins.

He had a vague recollection of making a frantic clutch at something huge that glistened. He had a much sharper recollection of feeling that something move beneath his fingers.

The whirring began immediately and didn't stop. It was faint at first, very faint, but it increased so rapidly in volume that Shevlin had no time to leap back.

For one terrifying instant he seemed to be standing on the brink of a colossal sandstorm, his ears filled with a dull roar that was half a silence. Then there was a flurry of scintillating metal particles, and something seemed to lift him up, and hurl him backwards through a

cyclone of motion toward a tumbled waste of emptiness.

When Shevlin struggled to a sitting position the floor was once more firm beneath him, and the machinery had ceased to gyrate. For an instant the walls had seemed to contract in fitful gusts, but now there was nothing to indicate that a convulsion of incalculable magnitude had taken place on the opposite side of the cellar.

He was beginning to think he'd suffered a vertigo attack and imagined the whole thing when he heard his wife's voice calling to him from the head of the stairs.

"Roger, come up here quick! I can't see out of the windows! Roger, hurry!"

Shevlin gasped, got swayingly to his feet, and mounted the stairs in five long bounds that carried him well past his wife, who had retreated into the lower hallway, and was staring at him out of eyes that seemed to fill her face.

"What do you mean, you can't see out?" he demanded.

"It's like a fine, dazzling mist," Elsie said, in a stunned voice. "You can see it best from the living room window."

The living room was filled with little dazzling dust motes that seemed to follow Shevlin as he crossed to the window, pressed his face to the pane and stared out with utter incredulity surging up in him.

"It can't be an ordinary fog," Elsie said. "It came up much too—Roger!"

"Yes, what is it?" Shevlin asked.

"The other pane!" Elsie almost screamed. "A little man with a horrible, *shrunk* face looked right at me!"

Shevlin swung about. "Oh, nonsense," he said anxiously. "You're making a mountain out of a fog bank."

"But I tell you, I saw him! Oh, I did, I did! You didn't, but I did!"

"All right," Shevlin said, his mouth tightening. "Shock does strange things to the mind. I most certainly didn't see him, but I'm going right out now and puncture him before we follow him over the hill to the madhouse."

He turned as he spoke and went striding toward the front door. Seemingly the door had soaked up a stickiness, for he had to tug and wrench at it, and the knob kept slipping out of his hand.

But it came open at last, and Shevlin found himself on the porch staring wildly about him. As far as he could see there wasn't anyone in sight. But he couldn't see very far, for the fog was thicker than he'd ever imagined a fog could be. "Oh, my stars!" he muttered, through clenched teeth.

"You're just not used to *our* kind of weather," a wheezy voice said. "Climatic conditions change quite a bit in a half million years."

Shevlin caught his breath.

Directly in front of him the fog had thinned a little, and—he could see the little man standing there.

The little man wasn't a dwarf exactly, but he was well below medium height and his cranium bulged so that his face seemed much more shrunken than it actually was. It was sufficiently shrunken, however, to resemble a tissue-paper mask which some besotted reveler had bought as a hand-me-down, daubed with rouge and worn once too often.

He didn't seem to be wearing much in the way of clothes. Or perhaps it would have been more correct to say he had been ill-advised in the matter of clothes. From his scrawny chest to just above the knees a thin, one-piece garment—not unlike a sarong—clung loosely to his mummy-thin body, obscuring what it couldn't conceal and taking a little of the curse off. But his shoulders were completely bare, his elbows stuck out and his legs were visible in their crookedness. He was entirely unshod.

"In another fifty years we'd have mastered time travel ourselves," the gnomish apparition said. "But now we shall have it right away."

"Yes, naturally," Shevlin said, blankly. "You'll have it—right away."

"I'm confident we will," the little man agreed. "You know the secret and will communicate it to us."

As though unaware that Shevlin had stiffened the little man bowed.

"Perhaps I'd better introduce myself. My name is Papenek, and I'm probably the only man on earth who could cope with a development like this. You see, the house didn't enter our time sector quite as fast as it left yours, so we had time to step up the beam and get a good look at it."

"You—"

"When we saw the house coming, Valt—he's our Chief Monitor—sent for me immediately. 'You can speak the language of First Atomic Age primitives as fluently as I can,' Valt told me. 'Take a tube and go right over there. If necessary, use persuasion.'"

The little man smiled. "Valt provides for every contingency. He wouldn't be where he is if he didn't. But I'm sure persuasion won't be necessary. You want to help us, don't you."

Shevlin had no clear recollection of leaping back through the front door and slamming it in the little man's face. But he must have done so, because he suddenly found himself inside the house with his back to the door and his stomach crawling with cold terror.

"Roger, what is it?" Elsie said, in a shrill, small voice. "What did you see out there? Why are you staring at me like that?"

Shevlin turned abruptly, and twisted the knob of the door to make



sure it wouldn't open behind his back.

"The little man I didn't think was there is standing out on the front porch," he said. "He says the climate has changed a bit because we're a half million years ahead of the clock."

"A half million—"

"Apparently the professor wired the house for time travel," Shevlin said, moistening his dry lips. "Cruel and thoughtless people sometimes leave litters of unwanted puppies in damp cellars for the neighbors and the health department to worry about. I'm simply guessing, of course. But I've a hunch the professor just didn't realize how close to success he was. When that huge clutter of machinery down in the cellar wouldn't work he must have got disgusted and walked out on it."

Elsie screamed.

The little man was standing just inside the door, his eyes riveted on Shevlin's twitching face.

"Wood is an extremely hard substance to make permeable," he said, as though he were addressing a child. "It has never ceased to amaze me that the First Atomic Age could run its entire course without collapsing such dwellings in their entirety."

"It...it's just beginning," Shevlin muttered, a little wildly.

"You mean the First Atomic Age. Yes, I rather gathered you hadn't advanced very far into it. Certainly not as far as the Great Holocaust, which wiped out all but a pitiful remnant of the human race."

"One redeeming feature, though," he added, as though he'd just thought of it. "The mutations which made our race possible began to occur right after the first atomic bomb was dropped."

For the first time Shevlin noticed that Papenek was clasping a small glowing tube about five inches in length. It wasn't elaborate—in fact, a test tube filled with light wouldn't have looked any different, except that there was nothing inside the tube to account for the light.

"Don't be alarmed," Papenek said, with a deprecatory gesture. "The house won't collapse. I used the beam so sparingly that it didn't even destroy the wall when I came through. As you can see, all it did was make the wall permeable. I could walk out just as easily as I walked in, but—I've certainly no intention of leaving just yet."

Wide-eyed, Elsie turned sharply. "You hear that? He's going to *visit with us!*"

Papenek turned, and started at Shevlin's wife. "The tyranny of hysteria is the most crippling of all tyrannies because the normal mind has absolutely no defense against it," he said coldly. "Fortunately we now know how to deal with such aberrations. Women are so highly replaceable that we have no scruples about—"

He was interrupted by sudden clatter on the great central staircase.

Down it came first Shevlin's only son and heir, Roger J. Shevlin, Jr., pulling after him a toy locomotive and three streamlined pullman cars. The cars bumped and careened perilously on every step and for an instant Shevlin was sure they would come uncoupled. It was curious, but just watching the train descend steadied Shevlin, so that his daughter's noisy appearance at the top of the stairs armed with his son's air rifle did not unnerve him too much.

What horribly unnerved him was the expression on Papenek's face when Petty Lou Shevlin screwed up her face, and aimed the rifle straight down the banisters at the little man from the future.

*BBBRRUPP!*

Though the bb shot hit Papenek in the most delicate part of his anatomy he didn't budge an inch. Surprisingly he just stood very still, his lips sucked in and a doughy knobiness sprouting from his face. Then, slowly, his features picked themselves up from where they had landed and regrouped themselves where the doughiness was most pronounced, giving him the aspect of a tormented half-wit.

"Children!" he said, icily.

"Y-you still have them, d-don't you?" Shevlin asked, a coldness encircling his scalp.

"Oh, yes, we still have them," Papenek said.

"I...I suppose you treat them differently than we do, though. Give them haywire toys to play with that turn them into pitiful little adult lunatics before they're six."

Being an imaginative man Shevlin had often tried to imagine what the children of the far distant future would be like. Despite his terror, despite the fact that Betty Lou was now tripping down the stairs in the wake of his son he couldn't repress a certain curiosity as to the young of the species which his own descendants had sired.

"No, we don't," Papenek said, a malevolent resentment in his stare. "The human infant has a long learning period. We...we don't try to telescope it. All we do is utilize it to teach a child the rudiments of civilized behavior. What amazes me is that you haven't utilized it at all. Your children are far more primitive than young orangutans or chimpanzees."

"*Are they?*" Shevlin said, and something in his tone made Papenek tighten his hold on the tube and take another swift step backward.

"I didn't mean to seem patronizing," Papenek said. "You First Atomic Age primitives must have had a quite astonishing grasp of scientific imponderables in some respects. Perhaps I should say 'hit-or-miss techniques.' In a crude way you've outdistanced us. Possibly a barbaric, not to say, savage childhood has given you a certain mental resilience which—"

He was not permitted to finish. Betty Lou had dropped the air rifle,

seized her brother by the arm, and was dragging him toward Papenek as though she wanted something confirmed which she didn't dare refer to in the presence of her parents.

"I tell you he has!" she shrieked. "He has, he has, *he has!*"

"Aw, he's just a dwarf," Junior protested. "Let him alone and he'll sing 'happy birthday to you' from the Western Union."

It all seemed like a dream, but Shevlin knew it wasn't. The bright and shining faces of his brats were far too real and earnest.

And now Betty Lou was coming right out with it, accusing Papenek of having little knobby outgrowths at the base of his skull. Like horns they were, jutting out a good inch and a half on both sides of his neck.

Shevlin hadn't noticed them before. But now Papenek was fingering the growths, causing Elsie to squirm in horror.

"Directional organs," Papenek said, almost belligerently. "I'm not surprised those little savages should be upset by them."

"Directional—"

"They're vestigial in you," Papenek explained impatiently. "Cats, dogs and birds have a highly developed directional sense which our own ancestors lost far back in the Miocene. In fact, the bodies of all animals contain vestigial homologues of organs that were once functional. Certain snakes, for instance, have tiny skeletal legs buried under their skins, so incredibly minute as to present anatomical difficulties to a taxonomist."

"If he used any bigger words he'd choke himself," Junior said.

"If you're talking about snakes you needn't bother to tell us," Elsie muttered. "Just show us. Turn your back, Betty Lou. He wants to show us his buried legs."

"Directional organs are vestigial in you," Papenek said, ignoring the interruption. "But we've redeveloped them."

"Oh," replied Shevlin, his hands traveling to the bumps at the base of his own skull.

"Oh, don't," Elsie pleaded wildly.

*PLOP!*

Just why Junior should have seen fit to thrust out his leg and trip Papenek right at that moment was a riddle which the child psychologists of the future might have been capable of unraveling. But Shevlin doubted that.

He doubted it still more when he saw the look of fury on Papenek's face. The little man's features were so convulsed with rage that Shevlin feared his temples would burst.

A scream from Elsie warned him that there was no time to be lost.

Grabbing his son by the coat collar, Shevlin swung him about and started toward the stairs with him. He had little hope of reaching the top of the stairs before Papenek could regain his feet. It was more an

act of appeasement than anything else, and like most such acts it failed utterly to achieve its purpose.

He saw Papenek's hand go out, but he wasn't prepared for the blinding flash of radiance which shot from the tube.

He himself wasn't touched. Only Junior was touched.

For an instant Shevlin's son was bathed in an unearthly refulgence. Then—Elsie was babbling and clawing at Papenek's face, and a little wisp of smoke was hovering above a moist spot on the floor that might or might not have been Junior.

"No, no—don't," Papenek shouted, squirming and writhing under Elsie's merciless assault. "He'll come back. I just punished him a little. Do you think I'd extinguish a *child*!"

"He'll *come back*?" Elsie's voice was a shriek. "He'll—"

"Certainly. I just stepped up the beam a bit. Right now his body has the same refractive index as the air about him, but he'll waver back in about five...why, she seems to have fainted!"

Five minutes later Shevlin stood with his arm about his wife's sagging shoulders, watching his son wavering back.

Not all of Junior came back immediately. First his face materialized, pale and startled, and then the back of his head, and then his small body, and finally his feet. His feet took their time in coming back.

"I just didn't realize what a shock it would be to you," Papenek said. "You Atomic Age primitives had abnormally developed parental instincts. When *we* lose children we certainly don't lose any sleep over it. We—"

Something in Shevlin's stare caused him to break off abruptly.

Miraculously Junior didn't seem to be any worse for his experience. Though the punishment had surpassed a sound spanking in severity there was nothing to indicate that it had left a lasting impression on his mind.

As though to prove that it hadn't he bent over and stuck out his tongue at Papenek the instant he was himself again.

The little man seemed to reach a decision then. He moved closer to Shevlin and said, very quietly: "Perhaps you'd better take your children upstairs and put them to bed—or wherever you put them when you want to discuss serious matters in a quiet way."

"I'll take them up," Elsie said, just as quietly. "Stay here and talk to him, dear. Find out just how long he intends to stay. Before we make any plans we've got to find out what our chances are of staying alive in this house."

The next fifteen minutes were for Shevlin the most unnerving of all, for the instant Elsie's footsteps died away the little man asked him the sixty-four dollar question.

He'd been afraid all along that Papenek wouldn't believe he knew no more about time travel than the man in the moon. If he told Papenek the truth—He decided to stake everything on Papenek's capacity for recognizing the truth when he heard it. He avoided looking at the tube as he made his reckless bid for survival. He kept nothing back, even though it meant sacrificing the niggardly respect which Papenek had for the resourceful primitive he'd pretended to be.

It was a long moment before Papenek spoke.

For the first time the little man seemed visibly shaken, as though the bottom had dropped out of something that had flared with a blinding incandescence for him.

"I've been incredibly blind," he said. "I should have known that the father of such children would be incapable of inventing a time-traveling house."

Shevlin no longer felt angry—only cold. He suddenly realized that he'd put his cards on the table without weighing the advantages which might have accrued from playing them close to the chest. Not that he'd held a trump hand, exactly, but—

Startlingly Papenek said: "My mind works better on a full stomach. Before we go down in the cellar and have a look at the machinery perhaps we'd better have something to eat. Have you any eggs or fresh meat I could heat up?"

"Eggs?" Shevlin said, dazedly. "You mean you still eat—"

Papenek blinked. "Naturally we still eat. What gave you the idea we could live without food?"

"I...I took it for granted vitamin concentrates would be the food of the future. Even in our age—"

"Good earth, no!" Papenek said, impatiently. "It may take me a week—or a month—to learn the correct way of sending the house backwards and forwards in time. If I'm to be your guest I've no intention of foregoing the pleasures of the table."

Shevlin's face looked a little abnormal, as though it were reflecting his thoughts in an illicit way and not at all along the lines laid down by nature.

"You'll occupy the guest room, I suppose?"

"Why not?" Papenek said. "Oh, and while I think of it. I hope you have soft feather beds. If there's anything I detest it's a coarse hair mattress."

\* \* \* \*

Elsie looked down the long table, and pressed her palms to her temples. "He must have had specialized training in eating," she said.

Shevlin followed his wife's stare, wondering how he'd managed to live through the past three days.

Papenek had tucked a paper napkin under his chin, and was busily engaged in sucking his fifth egg. Having cooked the egg by stepping down the tube to its lowest potential, he seemed to consider it his duty to savor its flavor to the utmost.

"There isn't a great deal you can do to help me, Shevlin," he said, looking up. "But you might at least stop whispering to your wife while I'm eating. It upsets my digestion."

Shevlin shut his eyes, ground his teeth together and thought back seventy-two hours.

Papenek climbing into bed, after first bouncing up and down in the middle of the bed to make sure it would sustain his weight. Papenek drawing up the sheets, demanding a heating pad, and telling Elsie to get out.

"Your husband will see that I'm made comfortable. If there's anything I detest it's a woman standing in the doorway wringing her hands while I'm getting into bed. Get out! GET OUT!"

Elsie slamming the door, screaming back through the door: "Roger, there's some chloroform in the medicine cabinet! If you don't come out smelling of chloroform, you can start looking around for another wife!"

Papenek down in the cellar, very wide awake, bending over the machinery.

Hour after hour after hour. His lean and competent little hands working feverishly away in the glow which came from the tube as he stepped it up and down at ten-second intervals. Papenek using both his hands and the beam, turning occasionally to nod at Shevlin, gloating over this progress and making statements which filled Shevlin with steadily mounting dread.

Papenek saying: "Of course we'll go back immediately to your age and find the man and destroy him. If the secret leaked out, you First Atomic Age primitives might construct dozens of time machines and destroy our world completely. You almost destroyed your own world, so how can you be trusted with such knowledge?"

"But when you've found him—" Shevlin shuddered. "When you've done that you'll return to your age?"

"No, I can't promise you that. It may be necessary for us to police your world for a while. In fact, you may be sure we shan't allow anything to exist in the past which could possibly injure us here in the future. Even a minor infection should be cleansed at the source. Otherwise it will spread and fester."

Papenek was smacking his lips now, and rising from the table. "My work is so exacting I need a great deal of food to ward off fatigue," he said. "But you certainly don't need an egg apiece. Next time scramble one and divide it. You want the eggs to last, don't you?"

"If they were filled with cyanide, I'd want them to last," Elsie mumbled under her breath. "I'd even settle for roach poison."

"The little man who came for dinner," Shevlin whispered, "is eating us out of house and home. Perhaps we could sprinkle arsenic on the wall paper."

"Be careful, Shevlin," Papenek warned. "I shouldn't care to *really* step up the beam, but—I must warn you! Remarks like that disturb me because I know you mean them."

Shevlin's features darkened. "All right," he said, loudly. "I'll consider myself warned. Now what?"

"Back to work," Papenek said. "Success is almost within my grasp now, Shevlin. It might even come this morning."

He turned abruptly and went hobbling from the room.

Elsie waited until she heard him descending the cellar stairs before she took her husband's cold hands in her feverish ones and said, anxiously: "Roger, if it should come this morning, are we prepared for it?"

"About as prepared as the dodo was when the early Dutch navigators peppered his hide with a blunderbuss and blasted his nest right out from under him," Shevlin said.

He stood up as he spoke, pulling his hands free and shoving his chair back.

"That all-purpose tube he's toting doesn't merely alter electronic orbits. It controls atomic chain reactions in a way we've never dreamed they could be controlled. You might say it makes monkeys out of atoms."

Elsie nodded. "They'll overrun our age, Roger. They'll regulate, remold everything and everyone. They'll give us lessons in cooking, eating, mating and—dying. They'll complain, they'll be petulant. They'll be capricious and fretful. Sour little spinsters armed with glowing darning needles they are, male and female. I haven't seen the females, but—"

"We've seen Papenek. He's been our guest."

"Yes, we've seen Papenek."

A moment later Shevlin was descending the cellar stair. He moved cautiously, because he hoped to surprise Papenek in one of his unguarded moments and perhaps learn just how close to success he really was. Shevlin knew that not too much reliance could be placed on Papenek's words, but Papenek's expression would be a dead giveaway if he could be surprised in the very act of making a connection bright with promise.

It wouldn't have to be the final connection. It could be the one before the last or the one before that. What it boiled down to was that if Papenek was about to succeed the mounting tension would show up

in his features.

Shevlin was halfway down the stairs when he saw Papenek kneeling in shadows a little to the left of the beam cast by the tube, which was lying on a circular metal stand about twenty feet from the base of the stairs.

Shevlin's breath caught in his throat. It was the first time Papenek had ever turned his back on the tube or allowed it to stray so far from his person.

It was Shevlin's chance, and he knew it.

According to present ideas of motion a moving body can't be in two places at the same time. But almost Shevlin seemed to be crossing the cellar floor while his feet were still clattering on the stairs.

Probably it was simply a case of unbelievably speeded up reflexes. At any rate, he had the tube and was clasping it firmly when Papenek turned.

For perhaps five seconds Papenek's expression remained completely blank. Then, slowly, his mouth tightened and a purplish flush suffused his features.

"Put it down," he said.

Shevlin shook his head. "No. Remember what you said about an infection? It should be cleansed, you said, at the source."

For an instant Shevlin had feared that the tube might be completely smooth, precluding any attempt to step up its energies. But that fear, he now perceived, had been ill-grounded. The part he was clasping was slightly flattened, and he could detect beneath his thumb a double row of tiny protuberances, like musical stops on a child's toy flute.

"I'm afraid you don't realize just what the potential of that tube is," Papenek warned. "It could destroy the earth."

Shevlin was suddenly aware that his knees were shaking. He'd suddenly remembered that the ancients had believed that a flute could go completely bad, piping shrill mysterious music that could bring down the keystone of matter itself, could topple the very universe into an abyss.

Perhaps it was just thinking about that guess which further unnerved Shevlin, causing him to tighten his clasp on the tube. Or perhaps he'd been exerting too much pressure from the first. At any rate, there was a dull flare, and—total darkness came sweeping across the cellar like a moving wall, obliterating everything in its path.

Then out of the darkness came a voice, filled with utter hate.

"You've inverted the beam, Shevlin. Steady pressure, evenly applied, will do that. I can't see in the dark, but my directional organs will enable me to find you."

There was a sudden, metallic clatter.



"W-what are you doing?" Shevlin asked.

"Looking for a sharp, cutting instrument," Papenek replied, with startling candor. "With all these tools you'd think...ah, this will do very nicely. Before I kill you, Shevlin, there's something you may as well know.

"I can send the house back now, to your age or any age. You know that straining blade unit at the base of the central shaft—the one I was reassembling yesterday? Well, you just swing the blade completely around the neutral pole of the magnetic wave arrester and groove it into the third notch from the top. The third notch will carry the house completely back to your age."

Shevlin felt a sudden prickling at the base of his scalp. Under the guise of talking to him Papenek had moved very close to him in the darkness. He could hear the little man's harsh breathing, the shuffling scrape of his unshod feet.

Shevlin clenched his jaw. He'd often wondered just how much self-control he'd have if someone in a *position* to kill him was a murderer by choice or necessity. Now he knew.

He didn't have *any* self-control. But there were forms of fear which could paralyze—"I've got him, Pop! I'VE GOT HIM!"

The voice tore out of the darkness, exuberant, lusty, springy with confidence. It swelled into a mouthing of syllables that ran together as syllables are prone to do in the mouth of a nine-year-old almost beside himself with the joy of battle.

"I tripped him up, Pop! Pop, quick—turn on the lights!"

Mentally Shevlin poured himself a stiff one, swallowed it and went staggering blindly around the cellar in search of a dangling light bulb that continually seemed to elude his grasp.

He was still making frantic clutches at the air when the entire cellar blazed with light.

For an instant Shevlin thought that he'd collided with the bulb and jarred it on. Then he saw that by some distortion of pressure he'd energized the tube again, causing it to brim with more than its wonted share of light.

Papenek, armed with a very long and wicked-looking drill, was trying to get up. But Junior was sitting on Papenek's chest, swinging his legs and digging his thumbs into the little man's eye sockets, so remorselessly as almost to justify what Papenek had said about the savagery of children.

"You murderous little savage," Papenek shrieked. "Let me up, you hear? You primitive little—"

"Enough of that!" Shevlin said, claspings the tube very firmly and aiming it at Papenek's bulging brow. "One more word out of you and I'll step up the beam so high you'll be just a little wisp of smoke

drifting off into limbo. Perhaps less than that.”

Papenek quieted down.

“That’s better,” Shevlin said.

Very deliberately he unfastened his wrist watch and handed it to his son.

“What goes, Pop?”

Shevlin looked at his son. “Junior, just how long have you been down here?” he asked.

“Since before breakfast, Pop,” Junior said. “I’ve been spying on him ever since he started dismantling that straining blade unit yesterday afternoon. I was hiding in the coal bin, so I didn’t miss a thing. Y’know, Pop, there’s a make-or-break ignition factor involved that’s only partly magnetomotive. A regular manual pinion shift movement it is, Pop.”

“Hm-m-m,” Shevlin said. “Are you sure you can handle it, Junior. You didn’t seem like a prodigy to me when you tripped him three days ago for no reason at all. Not a prodigy born a year after the New Mexico experiment, at any rate.”

“Ah, that was just a gag, Pop. Betty Lou dared me. Besides, I wanted him to think that all I had inside my head was an elaborate arrangement of knocking tubes.”

Shevlin nodded at Papenek. “Remarkable boy in some respects. I.Q. of 270. It disturbs my wife more than it does me. Maturity will bring emotional balance, and we’ll need a few young *mutant* geniuses to handle the difficult tasks ahead. He can see in the dark too. Dark sight is common enough in Eskimos, but before 1945 extremely rare in Caucasoids. It’s more effective than directional organs, don’t you think?”

Papenek seemed to be having trouble with his face. It kept darkening and whitening in patches, and—his jaw had begun to twitch.

“If the house returns as fast as it came, we should be back in time for lunch,” Shevlin said. “Give me five minutes, Junior. Then notch in the thingamajig and let the straining blade...aw, shucks, I don’t have to tell *you* how to handle a machine. The Los Alamos radiations took care of that.”

“Just leave everything to me, Pop. I won’t even get grease on my hands.”

Shevlin flourished the tube a trifle menacingly.

“Start moving, Papenek,” he said.

Up the cellar stairs Papenek stumbled, his face a twitching mask. Down the lower hallway into the living room, and then out through the living room to the front porch. The permeable patch was just wide enough to enable Shevlin to pass through in Papenek’s wake. He had

to stoop a little, but he didn't mind because he knew that another ten seconds would see the last of Papenek.

Out on the porch he spoke sharply. "All right, jump!" he ordered. "Get on with you! Right out into the mist, little man!"

Papenek jumped from the porch.

Shevlin waited until he'd disappeared in the mist before he turned and went striding back into the house.

It was curious, but he'd grown quite fond of the house just in the last fifteen minutes. No—it went back further than that. The house, too, had gone through a lot, and like a faithful old collie dog that has shared man's trials and tribulations—He was suddenly aware that Elsie was standing in the living room door, her face distraught.

"Roger, I've searched everywhere for Junior," she said. "Do you suppose—"

Shevlin smiled and crossed to her side in three long strides.

"Don't worry," he said, kissing her. "Junior's at the helm and everything's under control. In just about five seconds now—"

There was a sudden, dazzling flash of light.

# A STONE AND A SPEAR, by Raymond F. Jones

Originally published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, December 1950.

From Frederick to Baltimore, the rolling Maryland countryside lay under a fresh blanket of green. Wholly unaware of the summer glory, Dr. Curtis Johnson drove swiftly on the undulating highway, stirring clouds of dust and dried grasses.

Beside him, his wife, Louise, held her blowing hair away from her face and laughed into the warm air. "Dr. Dell isn't going to run away. Besides, you said we could call this a weekend vacation as well as a business trip."

Curt glanced at the speedometer and eased the pressure on the pedal. He grinned. "Wool-gathering again."

"What about?"

"I was just wondering who said it first—one of the fellows at Detrick, or that lieutenant at Bikini, or—"

"Said *what*? What are you talking about?"

"That crack about the weapons after the next war. He—whoever it was—said there may be some doubt about what the weapons of the next war will be like, but there is absolutely no doubt about the weapons of World War IV. It will be fought with stones and spears. I guess any one of us could have said it."

Louise's smile grew tight and thin. "Don't any of you ever think of anything but the next war—*any* of you?"

"How can we? We're fighting it right now."

"You make it sound so hopeless."

"That's what Dell said in the days just before he quit. He said we didn't *have* to stay at Detrick producing the toxins and aerosols that will destroy millions of lives. But he never showed us how we could quit—and be sure of staying alive. His own walking out was no more than a futile gesture."

"I just can't understand him, Curt. I think he's right in a way, but what brought *him* to that viewpoint?"

"Hard to tell," Curt said, unconsciously speeding up again. "After the war, when the atomic scientists were publicly examining their consciences, Dell told them to examine their own guts first. That was typical of him then, but soon after, he swung just as strongly pacifist and walked out of Detrick."

"It still seems strange that he abandoned his whole career. The world's foremost biochemist giving up the laboratory for a *truck farm*!"

Louise glanced down at the lunch basket between them. In it were tomatoes that Dr. Hamon Dell had sent along with his invitation to visit him.

\* \* \* \*

For nearly a year Dr. Dell had been sending packages of choice fruit and vegetables to his former colleagues, not only at the biological warfare center at Camp Detrick but at the universities and other research centers throughout the country.

"I wish we knew exactly why he asked us to come out," said Louise.

"Nobody claims to have figured him out. They laugh a little at him now. They eat his gifts willingly enough, but consider him slightly off his rocker. He still has all his biological talents, though. I've never seen or tasted vegetables like the ones he grows."

"And the brass at Detrick doesn't think he's gone soft in the head, either," she added much too innocently. "So they ordered you to take advantage of his invitation and try to persuade him to come back."

Curt turned his head so sharply that Louise laughed.

"No, I didn't read any secret, hush-hush papers," she said. "But it's pretty obvious, isn't it, the way you rushed right over to General Hansen after you got the invitation?"

"It is hush-hush, top-secret stuff," said Curt, his eyes once more on the road. "The Army doesn't want it to leak, but they need Dell, need him badly. Anyone knowing bio-war developments would understand. They wanted to send me before. Dell's invitation was the break we needed. I may be the one with sufficient influence to bring him back. I hope so. But keep it under your permanent and forget your guessing games. There's more to it than you know."

The car passed through a cool, wooded section and Louise leaned back and drank in the beauty of it.

"Hush-hush, top secret stuff," she said. "Grown men playing children's games."

"Pretty deadly games for children, darling."

\* \* \* \*

In the late afternoon they by-passed the central part of Baltimore and headed north beyond the suburb of Towson toward Dell's truck farm.

His sign was visible for a half mile:

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT  
*Eat the Best*  
EAT DELL'S VEGETABLES

"Dr. Hamon Dell, world's foremost biochemist—and truck farmer," Curt muttered as he swung the car off the highway.

Louise stepped out when the tires ceased crunching on the gravel lane. She scanned the fields and old woods beyond the ancient but preserved farmhouse. "It's so unearthly."

Curt followed. The song of birds, which had been so noticeable before, seemed strangely muted. The land itself was an alien, faintly greenish hue, a color repulsive to more than just the eyes.

"It must be something in this particular soil," said Curt, "something that gives it that color and produces such wonderful crops. I'll have to remember to ask Dell about it."

"You want Dr. Dell?"

They whirled at the sound of an unfamiliar voice. Louise uttered a startled cry.

The gaunt figure behind them coughed asthmatically and pointed with an arm that seemed composed only of bones and brownish skin, so thin as to be almost translucent.

"Yes," said Curt shakenly. "We're friends of his."

"Dell's in back. I'll tell him you're here."

The figure shambled away and Louise shook herself as if to rid her mind of the vision. "If our grandchildren ever ask about zombies, I can tell them. Who in the world do you suppose he is?"

"Hired man, I suppose. Sounds as if he should be in a lung sanitarium. Funny that Dell would keep him around in that condition."

From somewhere behind the house came the sound of a truck engine. Curt took Louise's arm and led her around the trim, graveled path.

The old farmhouse had been very carefully renovated. Everywhere was evidence of exquisite care, yet the cumulative atmosphere remained uninviting, almost oppressive. Curt told himself it was the utter silence, made even more tense by the lonely chugging of the engine in back, and the incredible harsh color of the soil beneath their feet.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rounding the corner, they came in sight of a massive tank truck. From it a hose led to an underground storage tank and pulsed slowly under the force of the liquid gushing through it. No one was in sight.

"What could that be for?" asked Louise.

"You've got me. Could be gasoline, but Dell hasn't any reason for storing that much here."

They advanced slowly and amazement crept over Curt as he comprehended the massiveness of the machine. The tank was of elliptical cross section, over ten feet on its major axis. Six double wheels supported the rear; even the front ones were double. In spite of

such wide weight distribution, the tires were pressing down the utterly dry ground to a depth of an inch or more.

"They must haul liquid lead in that thing," said Curt.

"It's getting cool. I wish Dell would show up." Louise glanced out over the twenty-acre expanse of truck farm. Thick rows of robust plants covered the area. Tomatoes, carrots, beets, lettuce, and other vegetables—a hundred or so fruit trees were at the far end. Between them ran the road over which the massive truck had apparently entered the farm from the rear.

A heavy step sounded abruptly and Dell's shaggy head appeared from around the end of the truck. His face lighted with pleasure.

"Curt, my boy! And Louise! I thought you weren't going to show up at all."

Curt's hand was almost lost in Dell's enormous grip, but it wasn't because of that that his grip was passive. It was his shocked reaction to Dell's haggard appearance. The fierce eyes looked merely old and tired now. The ageless, leathery hide of Dell's face seemed to have collapsed before some overpowering decay, its bronze smoothness shattered by deep lines that were like tool marks of pain.

Curt spoke in a subdued voice. "It's hard to get away from Detrick. Always one more experiment to try—"

"—And the brass riding you as if they expected you to win another war for them tomorrow afternoon," said Dell. "I remember."

"We wondered about this truck," Louise commented brightly, trying to change the subject. "We finally gave up on it."

"Oh, that. It brings liquid fertilizer to pump into my irrigation water, that's all. No mystery. Let's go on to the house. After you're settled we can catch up on everything and I'll tell you about the things I'm doing here."

"Who's the man we saw?" asked Curt. "He looks as if his health is pretty precarious."

"That's Brown. He came with the place—farmed it for years for my uncle before I inherited it. He could grow a garden on a granite slab. In spite of appearances, he's well enough physically."

"How has your own health been? You have—changed—since you were at Detrick."

Dell raised a lock of steel-gray hair in his fingers and dismissed the question with a wan smile. "We all wear out sometime," he said. "My turn had to come."

\* \* \* \*

Inside, some of the oppressiveness vanished as the evening passed. It was cool enough for lighting the fireplace, and they settled before it after dinner. While they watched the flickering light that whipped the

beamed ceiling, Dell entertained them with stories of his neighbors, whose histories he knew clear back to Revolutionary times.

Early, however, Louise excused herself. She knew they would want privacy to thresh out the purposes behind Dell's invitation—and Curt's acceptance.

When she was gone, there was a moment's silence. The logs crackled with shocking pistol shots in the fireplace. The scientist moved to stir the coals and then turned abruptly to Curt.

"When are you going to leave Detrick?"

"When are *you* coming back?" Curt demanded instead of answering.

"So they still want me, even after the things I said when I left."

"You're needed badly. When I told Hansen I was coming down, he said it would be worth five years of my own work to bring you back."

"They want me to produce even deadlier toxins than those I gave them," Dell said viciously. "They want some that can kill ten million people in four minutes instead of only one million—"

"Any man would go insane if he looked at it that way. It would be the same as gun-makers being tormented by the vision of torn men destroyed by their bullets, the sorrowing families—"

"And why shouldn't the gun-makers be tormented?" Dell's voice was low with controlled hate. "They are men like you and me who give the *war*-makers new tools for their trade."

"Oh, Dell, it's not as simple as that." Curt raised a hand and let it fall wearily. They had been over this so many times before. "Weapon designers are no more responsible than any other agents of society. It's pure neurosis to absorb the whole guilt of wars yet unfought merely because you happened to have developed a potential weapon."

Dell touched the massive dome of his skull. "Here within this brain of mine has been conceived a thing which will probably destroy a billion human lives in the coming years. *D. triconus* toxin in a suitable aerosol requires only a countable number of molecules in the lungs of a man to kill him. My brain and mine alone is responsible for that vicious, murderous discovery."

"Egotism! Any scientist's work is built upon the pyramid of past knowledge."

"The weapon I have described exists. If I had not created it, it would not exist. It is as simple as that. No one shares my guilt and my responsibility. And what more do they want of me now? What greater dream of mass slaughter and destruction have they dreamed?"

"They want you," said Curt quietly, "because they believe we are not the only ones possessing the toxin. They need you to come back and help find the antitoxin for *D. triconus*."

Dell shook his head. "That's a blind hope. The action of *D. triconus* is like a match set to a powder train. The instant its molecules contact



protoplasm, they start a chain reaction that rips apart the cell structure. It spreads like fire from one cell to the next, and nothing can stop it once it's started operating within a given organism."

"But doesn't this sense of guilt—unwarranted as it is—make you *want* to find an antitoxin?"

"Suppose I succeeded? I would have canceled the weapon of an enemy. The military would know he could nullify ours in time. Then they would command me to work out still another toxin. It's a vicious and insane circle, which must be broken somewhere. The purpose of the entire remainder of my life is to break it."

"When you are fighting for your life and the enemy already has his hands about your throat," Curt argued, "you reach for the biggest rock you can get your hands on and beat his brains in. You don't try to persuade him that killing is unethical."

For an instant it seemed to Curt that a flicker of humor touched the corners of Dell's mouth. Then the lines tightened down again.

"Exactly," he said. "You reach for a rock and beat his brains in. You don't wipe human life off the face of the Earth in order to reach that enemy. I asked you to come down here to help me break this circle of which I spoke. There has to be someone here—after I'm gone—"

Dell's eyes shifted to the depths of shadows beyond the firelight and remained fixed on unseen images.

"Me? Help you?" Curt asked incredulously. "What could I do? Give up science and become a truck gardener, too?"

"You might say that we would be in the rock business," replied Dell. "Fighting is no longer on the level of one man with his hands about another's throat, but it *should* be. Those who want power and domination should have to fight for it personally. But it has been a long time since they had to.

"Even in the old days, kings and emperors hired mercenaries to fight their wars. The militarists don't buy swords now. They buy brains. We're the mercenaries of the new day, Curt, you and I. Once there was honor in our profession. We searched for truth for its own sake, and because it was our way of life. Once we were the hope of the world because science was a universal language.

"What a horrible joke that turned out to be! Today we are the terror of the world. The war-makers built us fine laboratories, shining palaces, and granted every whim—for a price. They took us up to the hills and showed us the whole world and we sold our souls for it.

"Look what happened after the last war. Invading armies carried off prize Nazi brains like so much loot, set the scientists up in big new laboratories, and these new mercenaries keep right on pouring out knowledge for other kings and emperors.

"Their loyalty is only to their science. But they can't experiment for

knowledge any more, only weapons and counter-weapons. You'll say I'm anti-war, even, perhaps, anti-American or pro-Russian. I am not against just wars, but I am against unjust slaughter. And I love America too much to let her destroy herself along with the enemy."

"Then what are we to do?" Curt demanded fiercely. "What are we to do while enemy scientists prepare these same weapons to exterminate *us*? Sure, it's one hell of a mess. Science is already dead. The kind you talk about has been dead for twenty years. All our fine ideals are worthless until the politicians find a solution to their quarrels."

"Politicians? Since when did men of science have to wait upon politicians for solutions of human problems?" Dell passed a hand over his brow, and suddenly his face contorted in pain.

"What is it?" Curt exclaimed, rising.

"Nothing—nothing, my boy. Some minor trouble I've had lately. It will pass in a moment."

With effort, he went on. "I wanted to say that already you have come to think of science being divided into armed camps by the artificial boundaries of the politicians. Has it been so long ago that it was not even in your lifetime, when scientists regarded themselves as one international brotherhood?"

"I can't quarrel with your ideals," said Curt softly. "But national boundary lines do, actually, divide the scientists of the world into armed camps."

"Your premises are still incorrect. They do not deliberately war on each other. It is only that they have blindly sold themselves as mercenaries. And they can be called upon to redeem themselves. They can break their unholy contracts."

"There would have to be simultaneous agreement among the scientists of all nations. And they are men, influenced by national ideals. They are not merely ivory-tower dabblers and searchers after truth."

"Do you remember me five years ago?" Dell's face became more haggard, as if the memory shamed him. "Do you remember when I told the atomic scientists to examine their guts instead of their consciences?"

"Yes. You certainly *have* changed."

"And so can other men. There is a way. I need your help desperately, Curt—"

The face of the aging biochemist contorted again with unbearable pain. His forehead beaded with sweat as he clenched his skull between his vein-knotted hands.

"Dell! What is it?"

"It will pass," Dr. Dell breathed through clenched teeth. "I have

some medicine—in my bedroom. I'm afraid I'll have to excuse myself tonight. There's so much more I have to say to you, but we'll continue our talk in the morning, Curt. I'm sorry—"

He stumbled out, refusing Curt's offer of aid with a grim headshake. The fire crackled loudly within the otherwise silent room. Curt felt cold at the descending chill of the night, his mind bewildered at Dell's barrage, some of it so reasonable, some of it so utterly confused. And there was no clue to the identity of the powerful force that had made so great a change in the once militant scientist.

Slowly Curt mounted the staircase of the old house and went to the room Dell had assigned them. Louise was in bed reading a murder mystery.

"Secret mission completed?" she asked.

Curt sat down on the edge of the bed. "I'm afraid something terrible is wrong with Dell. Besides the neurotic guilt complex because of his war work, he showed signs of a terrific and apparently habitual pain in his head. If that should be brain tumor, it might explain his erratic notions, his abandonment of his career."

"Oh, I hope it's not that!"

\* \* \* \*

It seemed to Curt that he had slept only minutes before he was roused by sounds in the night. He rolled over and switched on the light. His watch said two o'clock. Louise raised up in sharp alarm.

"What is it?" she whispered.

"I thought I heard something. There it is again!"

"It sounds like someone in pain. It must be Dell!"

Curt leaped from the bed and wrestled into his bathrobe. As he hurried toward Dell's room, there was another deep groan that ended in a shuddering sob of unbearable agony.

He burst into the scientist's room and switched on the light. Dell looked up, eyes glazed with pain.

"Dr. Dell!"

"Curt—I thought I had time left, but this is as far as I can go—Just remember all I said tonight. Don't forget a word of it." He sat up rigidly, hardly breathing in the effort of control. "The responsibility for the coming destruction of civilization lies at the doors of the scientist mercenaries. Don't allow it, Curt. Get them to abandon the laboratories of the warriors. Get them to reclaim their honor—"

He fell back upon the pillow, his face white with pain and shining with sweat. "Brown—see Brown. He can tell you the—the rest."

"I'll go for a doctor," said Curt. "Who have you had? Louise will stay with you."

"Don't bring a doctor. There's no escaping this. I've known it for

months. Wait here with me, Curt. I'll be gone soon."

Curt stared with pity at the great scientist whose mind had so disintegrated. "You need a doctor. I'll call a hospital, Johns Hopkins, if you want."

"Wait, maybe you're right. I have no phone here. Get Dr. Wilson—the Judge Building, Towson—find his home address in a phone book."

"Fine. I'll only be a little while."

He stepped to the door.

"Curt! Take the lane down to the new road—behind the farm. Quicker—it cuts off a mile or so—go down through the orchard—"

"All right. Take it easy now. I'll be right back."

Curt frantically got dressed, ran down the stairs and out to the car. He wondered absently what had become of the cadaverous Brown, who seemed to have vanished from the premises.

\* \* \* \*

The wheels spun gravel as he started the car and whipped it out of the driveway. Then he was on the stretch of lane leading through the grove. The moonless night was utterly dark, and the stream of light ahead of the car seemed the only living thing upon the whole landscape. He almost wished he had taken the more familiar road. To get lost now might mean death for Dell.

No traffic flowed past him in either direction. There were no buildings showing lights. Overwhelming desolation seemed to possess the countryside and seep into his soul. It seemed impossible that this lay close to the other highway with which he was familiar.

He strained his eyes into the darkness for signs of an all-night gas station or store from which he could phone. Finally, he resigned himself to going all the way to Towson. At that moment he glimpsed a spark of light far ahead.

Encouraged, Curt stepped on the gas. In less than ten minutes he was at the spot. He braked the car to a stop, and surveyed the building as he got out. It seemed more like a power substation than anything else. But there should be a telephone, at least.

He knocked on the door. Almost instantly, footsteps sounded within.

The door swung wide.

"I wonder if I could use your—" Curt began. He gasped. "Brown! Dell's dying—we've got to get a doctor for him—"

As if unable to comprehend, the hired man stared dumbly for a long moment. His hollow-cheeked face was almost skeletal in the light that flooded out from behind him.

Then from somewhere within the building came a voice, sharp with tension. "Brown! What the devil are you doing? Shut that door!"

That brought the figure to life. He whipped out a gun and motioned Curt inward. "Step inside. We'll have to decide what to do with you when Carlson finds you're here."

"What's the matter with you?" Curt asked, stupefied. "Dell's dying. He needs help."

"Get in here!"

Curt moved slowly forward. Brown closed the door behind him and motioned toward a closed door at the other end of a short hall. They opened it and stepped into a dimly lighted room.

Curt's eyes slowly adjusted and he saw what seemed to be a laboratory. It was so packed with equipment that there was scarcely room for the group of twelve or fifteen men jammed closely about some object with their backs to Curt and Brown.

Brown shambled forward like an agitated skeleton, breaking the circle. Then Curt saw that the object of the men's attention was a large cathode ray screen occupied by a single green line. There was a pip on it rising sharply near one side of the two-foot tube. The pip moved almost imperceptibly toward a vertical red marker over the face of the screen. The men stared as if hypnotized by it.

\* \* \* \*

The newcomers' arrival, however, disturbed their attention. One man turned with an irritable growl. "Brown, for heaven's sake—"

He was a bony creature, even more cadaverous than Brown. He caught sight of Curt's almost indecently robust face. He gasped and swore.

"Who is this? What's he doing here?"

The entire montage of skull faces turned upon Curt. He heard a sharp collective intake of breath, as if his presence were some unforeseen calamity that had shaken the course of their incomprehensible lives.

"This is Curtis Johnson," said Brown. "He got lost looking for a doctor for Dell."

A mummylike figure rose from a seat before the instrument. "Your coming is tremendously unfortunate, but for the moment we can do nothing about it. Sit here beside me. My name is Tarron Sark."

The man indicated a chair.

"My friend, Dr. Dell, is dying," Curt snapped out, refusing to sit down. "I've got to get help. I saw your light and hoped you'd allow me to use your phone. I don't know who you are nor what Dell's hired man is doing here with you. But you've got to let me go for help!"

"No." The man, Sark, shook his head. "Dell is reconciled. He has to go. We are awaiting precisely the event you would halt—his death."

He had known it, Curt thought, from the moment he entered that

room. Like vultures sitting on cliffs waiting for the death of their prey, these fantastic men let their glance slip back to the screen. The green line was a third of the way toward the red marker now, and moving more rapidly.

It was nightmare—meaningless—

“I’m not staying,” Curt insisted. “You can’t prevent me from helping Dell without assuming responsibility for his death. I demand you let me call.”

“You’re not going to call,” said Sark wearily. “And we assumed responsibility for Dell’s death long ago. Sit down!”

Slowly Curt sank down upon the chair beside the stranger. There was nothing else to do. He was powerless against Brown’s gun. But he’d bring them to justice somehow, he swore.

He didn’t understand the meaning of the slowly moving pattern on the ’scope face, yet, as his eyes followed that pip, he sensed tension in the watching men that seemed sinister, almost murderous. How?

What did the inexorably advancing pip signify?

\* \* \* \* \*

No one spoke. The room was stifling hot and the breathing of the circle of men was a dull, rattling sound in Curt’s ears.

Quickly then, gathering sudden momentum, the pip accelerated. The circle of men grew taut.

The pip crossed the red line—and vanished.

Only the smooth green trace remained, motionless and without meaning.

With hesitant shuffling of feet, the circle expanded. The men glanced uncertainly at one another.

One said, “Well, that’s the end of Dell. We’ll soon know now if we’re on the right track, or if we’ve botched it. Carlson will call when he’s computed it.”

“The end of Dell?” Curt repeated slowly, as if trying to convince himself of what he knew had happened. “The pip on the screen—that showed his life leaving him?”

“Yes,” said Sark. “He knew he had to go. And there are perhaps hundreds more like him. But Dell couldn’t have told you of that—”

“What will we do with him?” Brown asked abruptly.

“If Dell is dead, you murdered him!” Curt shouted.

A rising personal fear grew within him. They could not release him now, even though his story would make no sense to anybody. But they had somehow killed Dell, or thought they had, and they wouldn’t hesitate to kill Curt. He thought of Louise in the great house with the corpse of Haman Dell—if, of course, he was actually dead. But that was nonsense....

“Dell must have sent you to us!” Sark said, as if a great mystery had suddenly been lifted from his mind. “He did not have time to tell you everything. Did he tell you to take the road behind the farm?”

Curt nodded bitterly. “He told me it was the quickest way to get to a doctor.”

“He did? Then he knew even better than we did how rapidly he was slipping. Yes, this was the quickest way.”

“What are you talking about?” Curt demanded.

“Did Dell say anything at all about what he wanted of you?”

“It was all wild. Something about helping with some crazy plans to retreat from the scientific world. He was going to finish talking in the morning, but I guess it wouldn’t have mattered. I realize now that he was sick and irrational.”

“Too sick to explain everything, but not irrational,” Sark said thoughtfully. “He left it to us to tell you, since you are to succeed him.”

“Succeed Dell? In what?”

Sark suddenly flipped a switch on a panel at his right. A screen lighted with some fuzzy image. It cleared with a slight dial adjustment, and Curt seemed to be looking at some oddly familiar moonlit ruin.

“An American city,” said Sark, hurrying his words now. “Any city. They are all alike. Ruin. Death. This one died thirty years ago.”

“I don’t understand,” Curt complained, bewildered. “Thirty years —”

“At another point in the Time Continuum,” said Sark. “The future. Your future, you understand. Or, rather, *our* present, the one you created for us.”

Curt recoiled at the sudden venom in Sark’s voice. “The *future*?” That was what they had in common with Dell—psychosis, systematic delusions. He had suspected danger before; now it was imminent and terrifying.

“Perhaps you are one of those who regard your accomplishments with pride,” Sark went on savagely, ignoring or unaware of Curt’s fear and horror. “That the hydrogen bombs smashed the cities, and the aerosols destroyed the remnants of humanity seems insignificant to you beside the high technical achievement these things represent.”

Curt’s throat was dry with panic. Irrelevantly, he recalled the pain-fired eyes of Dell and the dying scientist’s words: “The responsibility for the coming destruction of civilization lies at the doors of the scientist mercenaries—”

“Some of us *did* manage to survive,” said Sark, glaring at the scene of gaunt rubble. Curt could see the veins pounding beneath the thin flesh of his forehead. “We lived for twenty years with the dream of

rebuilding a world, the same dream that has followed all wars. But at last we knew that the dream was truly vain this time. We survivors lived in hermetically sealed caverns, trying to exist and recover our lost science and technology.

"We could not emerge into the Earth's atmosphere. Its pollution with virulent aerosols would persist for another hundred years. We could not bear a new race out of these famished and rickety bodies of ours. Unless Man was to vanish completely from the face of the Earth, we had only a single hope. That hope was to prevent the destruction from ever occurring!"

Sark's eyes were burning now. "Do you understand what that means? We had to go *back*, not forward. We had to arm to fight a new war, a war to prevent the final war that destroyed Mankind."

"Back? How could you go back?" Curt hesitated, grasping now the full insanity of the scene about him. "How have you *come* back?" He waited tautly for the answer. It would be gibberish, of course, like all the mad conversation before it.

\* \* \* \* \*

"The undisturbed flow of time from the beginning to the end—neither of which we can experience—we call the Prime Continuum," Sark replied. "Mathematically speaking, it is composed of billions of separate bands of probability running side by side. For analogy, you may liken it to a great river, whose many insignificant tributaries merge into a roaring, turbulent whole. That is the flow of time, the Prime Continuum.

"You may change one of these tributaries, dam it up, turn it aside, let it reach the main stream at a different point. No matter how insignificant the tributary, the stream will not be the same after the change. That is what we are doing. We are controlling critical tributaries of the Prime Continuum, altering the hell that you scientists have so generously handed down to us.

"Dell was a critical tributary. You, Dr. Curtis Johnson, are another. Changing or destroying such key individuals snips off branches of knowledge before they come into fruit."

It was an ungraspable answer, but it had to be argued against because of its conclusion. "The scientists are not bringing about the war," Curt said, looking from one fleshless face to another. "Find the politicians responsible, those willing to turn loose any horror to gain power. *They* are the ones you want."

"That would mean destroying half the human race. In your day, nearly every man is literally a politician."

"Talk sense!" Curt said angrily.

"A politician, as we have come to define him, is simply one willing



to sacrifice the common good for his own ends. It is a highly infectious disease in a day when altruism is taken for cowardice or mere stupidity. No, we have not mistaken our goal, Dr. Johnson. We cannot hasten the maturity of the race. We can only hope to take the matches away so the children cannot burn the house down. Whatever you doubt, do not doubt that we are from the future or that we caused Dell's death. He is only one of many."

Curt slumped. "I did doubt it. I still do, yet not with conviction. Why?"

"Because your own sense of guilt tells you that you and Dell and others like you are literally the matches which we have to remove. Because your knowledge of science has overcome your desire not to believe. Because you *know* the shape of the future."

"The war after the Third World War—" Curt murmured. "Someone said it would be fought with stones and spears, but your weapons are far from stones and spears."

"Perhaps not so far at that," said Sark, his face twisting wryly. He reached to a nearby table and picked up a tomato and a carrot. "These are our weapons. As humble and primitive as the stones and spears of cavemen."

"You're joking," Curt replied, almost ready to grin.

"No. This is the ultimate development of biological warfare. Man is what he eats—"

"That's what Dell's sign said."

"We operate hundreds of gardens and farms such as Dell's. We work through the fertilizing compounds we supply to these farms. These compounds contain chemicals that eventually lodge in the cells of those who eat the produce. They take up stations within the brain cells and change the man—or destroy him.

"Certain cells of the brain are responsible for specific characteristics. Ways of altering these cells were found by introducing minute quantities of specific radioactive materials which could be incorporated into vegetable foods. During the Third War wholesale insanity was produced in entire populations by similar methods. Here, we are using it to accomplish humane purposes.

"We are simply restraining the scientists responsible for the destroying weapons that produced our nightmare world. You saw the change that took place in Dell. There is a good example of what we do."

"But he *did* change," Curt pointed out. "He *was* carrying out your work. Wasn't that enough for you? Why did you decide he had to die?"

"Ordinarily, we don't want to kill if the change is produced. Sometimes the brain cells are refractory and the characteristics too

ingrained. The cells develop tumorous activity as a result of the treatment. So it was with Dell. In his case, however, we would have been forced to kill him by other means if he had not died as he did. This, too, he understood very well. That was why he really wanted no doctor to help him."

"You must have driven him insane first!"

"Look at this and see if you still think so." Sark led the way to a small instrument and pointed to the eyepiece of it. "Look in there."

Curt bent over. Light sprang up at Sark's touch of a switch. Then a scene began to move before Curt's eyes.

"Dell!" he exclaimed.

The scene was of some vast and well-equipped biological laboratory, much like those of Camp Detrick. Silent, mask-faced technicians moved with precision about their tasks. Dr. Dell was directing operations.

But there was something wrong. The figure was not the Dell that Curt knew.

As if Sark sensed Curt's comprehension of this, the scene advanced and swelled until the whole area of vision was filled with Dell's face. Curt gasped. The face was blank and hideous. The eyes stared. When the scene retreated once more, Curt saw now that Dell moved as an automaton, almost without volition of his own.

\* \* \* \*

As he moved away from the bench like a sleepwalker, there came briefly into view the figure of an armed guard at the door. The figure of a corporal, grim in battle dress.

Curt looked up, sick as if some inner sense had divined the meaning of that scene which he could not yet put into words.

"Had enough?" asked Sark.

"What does it mean?"

"That is Dell as he would have been. That is what he was willing to die to avoid."

"But what is it?"

"A military research laboratory twelve years into your future. You are aware that in your own time a good deal of research has come to a standstill because many first-string scientists have revolted against military domination. Unfortunately, there are plenty of second-stringers available and they are enough for most tasks—the youngsters with new Ph.D.s who are awed by the glitter of golden laboratories. But, lacking experience or imagination, they can't see through the glitter or have the insight for great work. Some will eventually, too late, however, and they will be replaced by eager new youngsters."

"This scene of Dell—"

“Just twelve years from what you call now. Deadlier weapons will be needed and so a bill will be passed to draft the reluctant first-line men—against their will, if necessary.”

“You can’t force creative work,” Curt objected.

Sark shrugged. “There are drugs that do wonderful and terrible things to men’s minds. They can force creation or mindless destruction, confession or outrageous subterfuge. You saw your opponents make some use of them. A cardinal, for example, and an engineer, among others. Now you have seen your friend, Dell, as he would have been. Not the same drugs, of course, but the end result is the same.”

Curt’s horror turned to stubborn disbelief. “America wouldn’t use such methods,” he said flatly.

“Today? No,” agreed Sark. “But when a country is committed to inhuman warfare—even though the goal may be honorable—where is the line to stop at? Each brutality prepares the way for the next. Even concentration camps and extermination centers become logical necessities. You have heard your opponents say that the end justifies the means. You have seen for yourself—the means become the end.”

“But Dell could have escaped,” Curt protested. “You could have helped him to your own time or another. He was still valuable. He needn’t have died!”

“There is no such thing as actual travel in time,” explained Sark. “Or at least in our day we have found none. There is possible only a bending back of a branch of the Prime Continuum so that we can witness, warn, instruct, gain aid in saving the future. And there can be meeting only in this narrow sector of unreality where the branch joins the main stream. Our farms adjoin such sectors, but farther than that we cannot go, nor can one of you become a citizen of the world you have created for us.

“But I wish it were so!” Sark bit out venomously. “We’d kidnap you by the millions, force you to look upon the ruin and the horror, let you breathe the atmosphere that no man can inhale and live, the only atmosphere there is in that world. Yes, I wish you could become our guests there. Our problem would be easier. But it can’t be done. This is the only way we can work.

“Dell had to go. There was no escape for him, no safety for us if he lived. He would have been tracked down, captured like a beast and set to work against his will. It was there in the Prime Continuum. Nothing could cancel it except death, the death that saves a billion lives because he will not produce a toxin deadlier than *D. triconus*.”

The vengeance in Sark’s voice was almost tangible. Involuntarily Curt retreated a step before it. And—almost—he thought he understood these men out of time.

“What is there—” he began hoarsely and had to stop. “What is there that I can do?”

“We need you to take over Dell’s farm. It is of key importance. The list of men he was treating was an extremely vital one. That work cannot be interrupted now.”

“How can you accomplish anything by operating only here?” Curt objected. “While you stifle our defenses, our enemies are arming to the teeth. When you’ve made us sufficiently helpless, they’ll strike.”

“Did I say we were so restricted?” answered Sark, smiling for the first time. “You cannot imagine what a fresh vegetable means on a professor’s table in Moscow. In Atomgrad a ripe tomato is worth a pound of uranium. How do I know? Because I walked the streets of Atomgrad with my grandfather.”

“Then you’re a—”

Sark’s face grew hard and bitter in the half light of the room. “Was,” he corrected. “Or might have been. There are no nationalities where there are no nations, no political parties where there are only hunger and death. The crime of the future is not any person’s or country’s. It is the whole of humanity’s.”

An alarm sounded abruptly.

“Carlson!” someone tensely exclaimed.

Sark whirled to the panels and adjusted the controls. A small screen lighted, showing the image of a man with graying hair and imperious face. His sharp eyes seemed to burn directly into Curt’s.

“How did it go?” exclaimed Sark. “Was the Prime Continuum shift as expected?”

“No! It still doesn’t compute out. Nothing’s right. The war is still going on. The Continuum is absolute hell.”

“I should have known,” said Sark in dismay. “I should have called you.”

“What is it? Do you know what’s wrong?”

“Johnson. Dr. Curtis Johnson. He’s here.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Rage spread upon Carlson’s face. An oath exploded from his lips. “No wonder the situation doesn’t compute with him out of the Prime Continuum. Why did he come there?”

“Dell sent him. Dell died too quickly. He didn’t have time to instruct Johnson. I have told him what we want of him.”

“Do you understand?” Carlson demanded of Curt with abruptness that was almost anger.

Curt looked slowly about the room and back to the face of his questioner. Understand? If they sent him back, allowed him to go back, could he ever be sure that he had not witnessed a thing of

nightmare in this shadowy dream world?

Yes, he could be sure. He had seen the blasted city, just the way he knew it could be—*would* be unless someone prevented it. He had seen the pattern on the scope, attuned to the tiny tributary of the Prime Continuum that was the life of Dr. Dell, had seen it run out, dying as Dell had died.

He could believe, too, that there was a little farm near Atomgrad, where a tomato on a scientist's table was more potent than the bombs building in the arsenal.

"I understand," he said. "Shall I go back now?"

Sark put a paper into his hands. "Here is a list of new names. You will find Dell's procedures and records in his desk at the farm. Do not underestimate the importance of your work. You have seen the failure of the Prime Continuum to compute properly with you out of it. You will correct that.

"Your only contact from now on will be through Brown, who will bring the tank truck once a year. You know what to do. You are on your own."

It was like a surrealist painting as he left. The moon had risen, and in all the barrenness there was nothing but the gray cement cube of the building. The light spilling through the open doorway touched the half dozen gaunt men who had followed him out to the car. Ahead was the narrow band of roadway leading through some infinite nothingness that would end in Dell's truck farm.

\* \* \* \*

He started off. When he looked back a moment later, the building was no longer there.

He glanced at the list of names Sark gave him, chilled by the importance of those men. For some there would be death as there had been for Dell. For himself—

He had forgotten to ask. But perhaps they would not have told him. Not at this time, anyway. The chemically treated food produced tumors in refractory, unresponsive cells. He had eaten Dell's vegetables, would eat more.

It was too late to ask and it didn't matter. He had important things to do. First would be the writing of his resignation to the officials of Camp Detrick.

As of tomorrow, he would be Dr. Curtis Johnson, truck farmer, specialist in atomic-age produce, luscious table gifts for the innocent and not-so-innocent human matches that would, if he and his unknown colleagues succeeded, be prevented from cremating the hopes of Mankind.

Louise would help him hang the new sign:

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT  
*Eat the Best*  
EAT JOHNSON'S VEGETABLES

Only, of course, she wouldn't know why he had taken Dell's job, nor could he ever explain.

It would probably be the death of Curt Johnson, but that was cheap enough if humanity survived.

# THE ORDEAL OF COLONEL JOHNS, by George H. Smith

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Clark Decker winced and scrounged still lower in his seat as Mrs. Appleby-Simpkin rested her enormous bosom on the front of the podium and smiled down on the Patriot Daughters of America in convention assembled as she announced: "And now, my dears, I will read you one more short quotation from Major Wicks' fascinating book 'The Minor Tactics of The American Revolution.' When I am finished, I know that you will all agree that Rebecca Johns-Hayes will be a more than fitting successor to myself as your President."

Decker looked wildly about for a way of escape from the convention auditorium. If he had only remained in the anteroom with Professor MacCulloch and the Historical Reintegrator! After suffering through four days of speeches by ladies in various stages of mammalian top-heaviness, he hadn't believed it possible that anyone could surpass Mrs. Appleby-Simpkin for either sheer ability to bore or for the nobility of her bust. Mrs. Rebecca Johns-Hayes had come as something of a shock as she squirmed her way onto the speaker's platform. But there she was as big as life, or rather bigger, smiling at Mrs. Appleby-Simpkin, the Past President, beaming at Mrs. Lynd-Torris, a defeated candidate for the presidency and whose ancestor had been only a captain, and completely ignoring Mrs. Tolman, the other defeated candidate whose ancestor had been so inconsiderate as to have been a Continental sergeant. Only the thought that now that the voting was over and the new president chosen, the ladies might be ready for the demonstration of the Reintegrator had brought Decker onto the convention floor, and now he was trapped and would have to listen.

"And so," Mrs. Appleby-Simpkin was reading, "upon such small events do the great moments of history depend. The brilliant scouting and skirmishing of the riflemen under Colonel Peter Johns prevented the breakthrough of Captain Fosdick's column and the possible flanking of the American army before Saratoga. Thus, this little known action may have been the deciding factor in the whole campaign that prevented General Burgoyne from carrying out the British plan to divide the colonies and end the war. It is impossible for the historian to refrain from speculation as to what might have happened had Colonel Johns not been on hand to direct the riflemen and militia in this section; as indeed he might *not* have been, since his own regiment

of short-term enlistees had returned to Pennsylvania a few days previously. Only the Colonel's patriotism and devotion to duty kept him in the field and made his abilities available to the country when they were most needed."

Mrs. Appleby-Simpkin waited until the burst of applause had died down and then continued, "That is the man whose great-great-great-great-granddaughter you have elected your president today...Mrs. Rebecca Johns-Hayes!" Turning to Mrs. Johns-Hayes she went on, "Before you make your acceptance speech, dear, we have a little surprise for you."

Clark Decker had been edging his way toward the side of the auditorium where the Men's Auxiliary of the Daughters had their seats but he turned back at the mention of the surprise. It sounded as though it was time for him and the Professor to start their demonstration.

"A surprise which we hope will also be a surprise to the whole world of science," Mrs. Appleby-Simpkin was holding the podium against a determinedly advancing Mrs. Johns-Hayes. "Indeed we may be able to say in future years, that this year's Convention of the Patriot Daughters was marked by the first public demonstration of one of the most momentous inventions in the history of science." The Past President was speaking faster and faster, because the new President with a hand full of notes was doing her best to edge her away from both the podium and the microphone.

"Thank you, darling," Mrs. Johns-Hayes said, pulling the microphone firmly toward her, "but we really must get along with business. I have quite a few things I want to say and several motions which I want to place before the Convention."

"And as I was saying, dear," Mrs. Appleby-Simpkin said, pulling the microphone back with equal firmness, "I know that you will be just unbearably thrilled." There was another brief struggle for the mike and Mrs. Appleby-Simpkin won and went on. "I know that he will be just as proud of you as you are of him. That is why we have arranged for Professor MacCulloch to demonstrate his historical Reintegrator at our convention by bringing into our midst Colonel Peter Johns, the hero of the action at Temple Farm, to see his great-great-great-great-granddaughter installed as the fifty-fourth president of the Loyal Order of Patriot Daughters of America. Now I...." Mrs. Johns-Hayes again won control of the mike.

"Thank you very much, dear." Her voice was a genteel screech. "I'm sure that we will be only too glad to have the...who? Who did you say?" Mrs. Appleby-Simpkin regained the microphone from the other woman's relaxing grip.

"I believe I see Mr. Decker, the Professor's assistant, in the



audience," she said. "Will you be so good as to tell the Professor that we are ready for his epic-making experiment?"

With a great feeling of relief, Decker escaped from the rising turmoil of the convention hall into the relative quiet of the anteroom where MacCulloch waited with the Reintegrator. He found the Professor sitting with his head in his hands staring at the machine. The little man looked up and smiled quizzically as his assistant approached him.

"They're ready, Professor! They're ready!" Still under the influence of the convention, Decker found himself shouting.

"Ah. Ah, yes. Then it will be today. I've waited so long. Ten years of work and now instead of a scientific gathering, I have to demonstrate my machine before a woman's club."

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Decker began to wheel the platform which held the Reintegrator toward the door. "After today, Professor, all the scientific organizations in the world will have heard of you and will be demanding demonstrations."

"Yes, but these Patriot Daughters! Who are they? Who in the scientific world ever heard of them?"

"No one except a few scientists unfortunate enough to fall afoul of their Loyalty and Conformity Committee."

"I think we should have gone elsewhere for our demonstration."

"Now Professor. Who in the world today would be interested in the past except a group of ancestor conscious women?"

"Some historical society perhaps," the Professor said wistfully.

"And what historical society could have advanced all the funds we needed to complete the machine?"

"I suppose you're right, my boy," MacCulloch sighed as he helped push the Reintegrator onto the auditorium floor.

By the time Clark Decker reached the platform to explain the demonstration, the fight for the microphone had turned into a three-way struggle. A lady who represented the Finance Committee was trying to win it away from both the Past President and the new President.

Taking them by surprise, Decker managed to gain control long enough to explain what was about to happen.

"You mean," demanded Mrs. Johns-Hayes, "that this is some sort of time machine and you're going to transport great-great-great-great-grandfather from the past into the present?"

"No, Mrs. Hayes. This isn't a time machine in the comic book use of the term. It is just what Professor MacCulloch has called it, an historical Reintegrator. The theory upon which it is based, the

MacCulloch Reaction, says that every person who ever existed, and every event which ever took place caused electrical disturbances in the space-time continuum of the universe by displacing an equal and identical group of electrons. The task of the Reintegrator is to reassemble those electrons. That is why Professor MacCulloch is now placing your ancestor's sword in the machine. We will use that as a base point from which our recreation will begin."

The machine was humming and small lights were beginning to play about its tubes and dials. "If our calculations are accurate, and we believe that they are," Decker said, "within a very few minutes, Colonel Johns should be standing before us as he was on a day approximately a week before his heroic action in the battle at Temple Farm."

Mrs. Johns-Hayes, although still gripping her notes, was beginning to get a little flustered. "Oh my, that would be before he married great-great-great-great-grandmother Sayles. They were married only two days before the battle, you know. It was so romantic...a wartime romance and all."

"Just imagine," Mrs. Tolman remarked, "at that time your whole family was just a gleam in the Colonel's eye!"

Professor MacCulloch made one or two last passes at the machine and then stood back to watch, a look of pure scientific ecstasy on his face. A mistiness began to gather on the platform where the Colonel's sword lay and through it from time to time shot sparks of electricity. Suddenly a gasp went up from the assembled Daughters as a man's head and shoulders appeared and expanded downward, a long way downward, to a large pair of feet. There was one last hum from the machine and then a tall young man in faded blue regimentals and very much in need of a shave was standing blinking in the blazing lights of the auditorium.

"Oh, Mr. Decker, surely there's some mistake!" was Mrs. Johns-Hayes' first comment as she surveyed the very tall, very tattered, and very dirty young man. "Great-great-great-great-grandfather's pictures always show him as a dignified old gentleman."

The Colonel took one quick look around and made a grab for his sword, but the Professor managed to calm him and to explain the situation before any violence could take place. After a few minutes of hurried talk, MacCulloch steered the Colonel in the direction of the speaker's platform for the meeting with his great-great-great-great-granddaughter.

Peter Johns' bewilderment faded into astonishment, but he still gripped his sword as the Professor guided him through the throngs of excited ladies onto the stage. He paused momentarily to look at the brilliant lights and at the huge number of American flags which hung

overhead. A picture of George Washington, hung among the flags, seemed to reassure him and he allowed the Professor to lead him to Mrs. Johns-Hayes.

That lady had drawn herself together at the approach of her ancestor and had obviously decided to carry it off as best she could. She advanced to meet him crying, "Dear, dear great-great-great-great-grandfather! This is such a pleasure! You can't know how proud all of us in the family have always been of you."

The young Continental officer stared open mouthed at the red-faced, big-bosomed woman who was twice his age, but who addressed him as great-great-great-great-grandfather. Then he turned to MacCulloch who stood beside him. "Are you sure you have the right man?" he asked.

"Oh yes! Perfectly, perfectly! You're Colonel Peter Johns of Pamworth, Pennsylvania, and this is your great-great-great-great-granddaughter, Rebecca Johns-Hayes."

"Rebecca? You mean she's named after Becky Sayles?" The Colonel rubbed a hand across his several days' growth of beard.

"That's right, dear great-great-great-great-grandfather. I'm named after great-great-great-great-grandmother," Mrs. Johns-Hayes announced.

"Then I married Becky Sayles?" the Colonel asked.

"Why, of course! Aren't you planning on getting married in a few days?" Clark Decker asked.

The Colonel was embarrassed but he grinned, "Well, I don't rightly know. Miss Sayles and I have been courtin' for some months but there's little Jennie Taylor down in Trenton.... To tell the truth, I haven't quite made up my mind."

"Well! Of all things! What would the family think! What would great Aunt Mary Hayes say?" Mrs. Johns-Hayes puffed out even farther than usual.

"Well, we can ease your mind on that subject, Colonel. The history books say that you married Miss Sayles—and here is Mrs. Johns-Hayes to prove it."

The Colonel scratched his chin again as he looked at Mrs. Johns-Hayes. "Is that so? Is that so? What's all this about history books? You mean I got in history because I married Becky Sayles?"

The Professor laughed. "Well, not exactly. It was because of your heroism in the defeat of Burgoyne's army. If you hadn't blocked Captain Fenwick's flanking move at Temple Farm, the American army under General Gates might have been defeated and the Colonies might even have lost the war."

"Well, I'll be.... Me? I did all that? I didn't even know there was going to be a battle. Did I end up a live hero or a dead one?" The

Colonel was beginning to feel a bit more easy in his surroundings, and, to the horror of Mrs. Johns-Hayes, took a plug of tobacco out of his pocket and bit off a piece and began to chew it.

"You came through the battle with only a slight wound and lived to a ripe old age surrounded by grandchildren," the Professor told him.

"Then I reckon I won't go back to Pennsylvania with the other boys. They figure that since their enlistments are up, it's time to get back to the farm and let them New Yorkers do some of their own fighting."

"Oh no! You weren't thinking of going back—of leaving the fighting?" Mrs. Johns-Hayes demanded.

The Colonel shifted his wad of tobacco and looked at the woman carefully as though he couldn't quite believe the evidence of his eyes. "No, ma'am, I don't reckon I am. I don't exactly look on it the same as the other boys do. I kind of feel like if we're ever going to have a country, it's worth fighting for."

Mrs. Johns-Hayes beamed, as did all the other officers of the Daughters. "Well, your faith and heroism have been rewarded, great-great-great-great-grandfather. I know you'll be proud to know that these ladies whom you see before you are the present guardians of the ideals that you fought for."

"Well, now, is that so, ma'am? Is that so?" Peter Johns looked around the convention hall in amazement.

"And that I, your descendant, have just been elected their President!"

"Well, what do you know about that! Maybe all the hard times and the danger we been going through is worth it if you folks still remember the way we felt about things."

"It's too bad," Decker whispered to MacCulloch, "that we can't let him see what the country is really like. I'm not sure these ladies are representative."

There was a worried look on the Professor's face. "That's impossible. The reintegration is good for only an hour or so. I hope nothing goes wrong here."

Mrs. Appleby-Simpkin took charge of the Colonel and ushered him to a seat of honor near the podium while the new President prepared to deliver her speech. Decker and the professor managed to obtain seats on either side of Johns just as Rebecca started. He managed to whisper to them, "I'm sure amazed! I'm sure amazed! All these nice old ladies feeling the same way about things as we do."

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Decker had a premonition of trouble as Mrs. Hayes' words poured forth. He had hoped for a cut and dried acceptance speech with nothing but the usual patriotic platitudes, but, as she went on his

worst fears were realized. Inspired by the presence of her ancestor, the woman was going into superlatives about the purposes and aims of the Patriot Daughters. She covered everything from the glories of her ancestry to the morals of the younger generation and women in politics.

Decker watched the Colonel's face, saw it changed from puzzlement to painful boredom as word after word floated from the battery of speakers overhead.

MacCulloch was whispering in Johns' ear in an attempt to draw his attention from the woman's booming voice but the man disregarded him. "Am I really responsible for that?" The Colonel jerked his head in the direction of Mrs. Johns-Hayes.

"I'm afraid, Colonel, that you're getting a distorted idea of what America is like in our time," Decker said. The Colonel didn't even turn to look at him. He was scowling at his Amazonian descendant as her screeching reached new heights.

"...and we hold that this is true! Our simple motto, as you all know, is: One race, one creed, one way of thinking!"

Colonel Johns began to squirm violently in his seat. The professor found it necessary to grasp him firmly by one arm while Decker held him by the other.

The president of the Patriot Daughters had finished her speech amidst thunderous applause and started to present suggestions for the formation of new committees, for the passing of new by-laws and for resolutions.

"A committee should be formed to see that the public parks are properly policed to prevent so-called 'spooners' from pursuing their immoral behaviour.

"A new by-law is needed," and here Mrs. Hayes glanced aside at Mrs. Tolman, "to prevent members being accepted unless their forebears were lieutenants or of higher rank in the glorious Continental army."

The Colonel was a strong man and both Decker and MacCulloch were older than he. With something between a snort and a roar he shook them loose and started for the exit.

"Oh my," MacCulloch moaned, "I was afraid that this whole thing was a mistake."

Colonel Johns had taken only two steps toward the door when he seemed to stagger. MacCulloch leaped to his side and caught him by the arm. There was an uproar in the auditorium as the Colonel faded slightly and the professor hurried him down the steps toward the Reintegrator.

"I'm afraid the Colonel isn't going to be with us much longer," the professor explained.

Thank goodness, Decker thought, I don't believe the poor man could have stood it much longer.

"I'm afraid the reintegration time of Colonel Johns is running out and he must return to his own time," the professor went on.

The grim-faced Colonel said nothing as MacCulloch led him up to the machine.

"Goodbye, great-great-great-great-grandfather," Mrs. Johns-Hayes called from the platform. "It has been so nice having you with us."

"Goodbye, Rebecca," the Colonel said as he began to fade away.

"Give my regards to great-great-great-great-grandmother."

The figure in the dirty, faded blue uniform was gone but Decker and MacCulloch heard him mutter just before he disappeared altogether, "I will, if I ever see her again!"

MacCulloch turned to stare at the platform and Decker turned to follow his gaze. A sudden dizziness overcame them both and there was a slight haze about the auditorium. When it cleared, the podium was empty. Mrs. Johns-Hayes was gone as if she had never been.

"My God!," the professor gasped. "I was afraid something like this might happen. He must have married the other girl."

"I suppose," Decker said quietly, "that we should consider ourselves lucky that he didn't decide to go back to Pennsylvania." His voice broke off and he wondered what he had been saying. He looked up at the speakers' platform trying to remember why he should think it strange that it was draped in Union Jacks and that Lady Appleby-Simpkin should be saying, "And now, my dears, I know that all of you, as Loyal Daughters of the British Empire will be happy to know...."

# PICTURE BRIDE, by William Morrison

Originally published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, June 1955.

My brother, Perry, always was a bit cracked. As a kid, he almost blew up our house doing experiments. When he was eighteen, he wrote poetry, but fortunately that didn't last long and he went back to science.

Now, when he showed me this picture, I figured he'd had a relapse of some kind. "This is the girl I'm in love with," he said.

She wasn't bad. Not bad at all, even if her clothes were crazy. She wasn't my type—too brainy-looking—although I could see how some guys would go for her. "I thought you liked blondes."

"I wouldn't give you two cents for all the blondes in Hollywood," he answered. "This is the only girl for me."

"You sound as if you've got it bad," I said. "You going to marry her?"

His face dropped about a mile. "I can't."

"You mean she's married already?" I was surprised. This wasn't like Perry at all.

He sort of hesitated, as if he was afraid of saying too much. "No, she isn't married. I asked her about that. But I can't marry her because—well, I've never met her. All I've seen of her is this picture and a few more. She doesn't live here."

"You mean she's in Europe?" I've heard of these love affairs by mail, and they never made much sense to me. I said to Perry, "Why can't she come to this country?"

"Oh, there are a lot of things in the way."

It sounded worse and worse. I said, "Look, Perry, this smells like a racket to me. It's the kind of thing a couple of shrewd operators cook up to take some hick for a ride. I'm surprised at you falling for it. How do you know there really is a dame like that in Europe? Anybody can send pictures—"

"You've got it all wrong," he said. "I've spoken to her."

"By phone? How do you know who's on the other end? You hear a dame's voice you never heard before. What makes you think it's hers?"

Again he didn't seem to want to talk, as if he had some secret to hide. But I guess he felt like getting things off his chest, too, or he wouldn't have opened up in the first place. And he had already told me enough so that if he didn't tell me more he'd sound like a dope.

So after hesitating even longer than before, he said, "Let's get this straight, George. This is no racket. I've seen and talked to her at the

same time. And the things she talked about, no con man would know.”

“You’ve seen and talked to her at the same time? You mean by TV? I don’t believe it. They can’t send TV to Europe.”

“I didn’t say it was TV. And I didn’t say she lived in Europe.”

“That’s exactly what you did say. Or maybe you meant she lived on Mars?”

“No. She’s an American.”

“This makes less and less sense to me. Where did you meet her?”

He turned red, and squirmed all over the place. Finally he said, “Right here in my own laboratory.”

“In your own laboratory! But you said you never met her in the flesh!”

“I didn’t. Not really by TV either. The fact is—she isn’t born yet.”

I backed away from him. When he was a kid and blew up our kitchen, I didn’t like it. When he wrote poetry, I was kind of ashamed and didn’t want my pals to know he was my brother. Now, I was really scared. Everything he had been saying in the last ten minutes began to make sense, but a screwy kind of sense.

He saw how I felt. “Don’t worry, George, I haven’t gone crazy. Her time is 2973, more than a thousand years from now. The only way I’ve seen and talked to her is on a time-contact machine.”

“Come again?”

“A kind of time machine. It can’t send material objects back and forth across time, as far as I know, but it can send certain waves, especially the kind we use to transmit signals. That’s how she and I could talk to each other and see each other.”

“Perry, I think you ought to see a good doctor.”

“It’s a remarkable device,” he said, paying no attention to how I was trying to help him. “She’s the one who first constructed it and contacted me. It’s based on an extension of Einstein’s equations—”

“You think you can explain so much,” I said. “Okay, then, explain this. This dame isn’t going to be born for a thousand years. And yet you tell me you’re in love with her. What’s the difference between you and somebody that’s nuts?” I asked, as if anybody knew the answer.

He certainly didn’t. In fact, he went ahead and proved to me that they were the same thing. Because for the next couple of weeks, the only thing he’d talk about, outside of equations I couldn’t understand, was this dame. How smart she was, and how beautiful she was, and how wonderful she was in every way that a dame can be wonderful, and how she loved him. For a time he had me convinced that she actually existed.

“Compared with you,” I said, “Romeo had a mild case.”

“There are some quantities so great that you can’t measure them,”



he said. "That will give you some idea of our love for each other."

There it went, the old poetry, cropping out in him just like before. And all the time I'd been thinking it was like measles, something that you get once and it builds up your resistance so you don't get it again, at least not bad. It just goes to show how wrong I could be.

"What preacher are you going to get to marry you?" I asked. "A guy born five hundred years from now?"

"I don't think that's funny," he said.

"You're telling me. Look, Perry, you're smart enough to know what I'm thinking—"

"You still think I'm crazy."

"I got an open mind on the subject. Now, if you won't see a doctor—then how about letting me take a look at this dame, so I can convince myself?"

"No," he said. "I've considered doing that, and decided against it. Her voice and image come through for only about five minutes a day, sometimes less. And those minutes are very precious to us. We don't want any one else present, any one at all."

"Not even to convince me she actually exists?"

"You wouldn't be convinced anyway," he said very shrewdly. "No matter what I showed you, you'd still find a reason to call it a fraud."

He was right at that. It would take a lot of convincing to make me believe that a babe who wasn't going to get born for a thousand years was in love with him.

By this time, though, I was sure of one thing—there was something screwy going on in that laboratory of his. For five minutes a day he was watching some dame's picture, listening to her voice. If I had an idea what she was like, I might figure out where to go from there.

I began keeping an eye on Perry, dropping in at the laboratory to pay him visits. There was what looked like a ten-inch TV tube in one corner of his place, not housed in a cabinet, but lying on the table among dozens of other tubes and rheostats and meters and other things I didn't know about. Along the wall that led from this corner was a lot of stuff which Perry said was high voltage, and warned me not to touch.

I kept away. I wasn't trying to figure out how to get myself killed. All I wanted to know was when he saw this girl.

Finally I managed to pin the time down to between three and four in the afternoon. For five minutes every day, during that hour, he locked the door and didn't answer phone calls. I figured that if I dropped in then I might get a glimpse of her.

And that's what I did.

At first, when I knocked on the door, there was no answer. In a minute, though, I heard Perry's voice, but he wasn't talking to me. He

was saying, “Darling,” and he sounded kind of sick, which I figured was due to love. Come to think of it, he might have been scared a little. I heard him say, “Don’t be afraid,” and it was quiet for about fifteen seconds.

Then I heard a terrific crash, like lightning striking. The door shook, and I smelled something sharp, and the first thing I wanted to do was get out of that place. But I couldn’t leave my brother in there.

I put my shoulder to the door and had no trouble at all. The explosion, or whatever it was, must have weakened the hinges. As the door crashed in, I looked for Perry.

There was no sign of him. But I could see his shoes, on the floor in front of that TV tube, where he must have been standing. No feet in them, though, just his socks. All the high-voltage stuff was smoking. The TV screen was all lit up, and on it I could see a girl’s face, the same girl whose picture Perry had shown me. She was wearing one of those funny costumes, and she looked scared. It was a clear picture, and I could even see the way she gulped.

Then she broke out into a happy smile and, for about half a second, before the second explosion, I could see Perry on the screen. After that second explosion—even though it wasn’t near as big as the first—that TV set was nothing but a mess of twisted junk, and there was no screen left to see anything on.

Perry liked to have everything just so, and he’d never think of going anyplace without his tie being knotted just right, and his socks matching, and so on. And here he’d traveled a thousand years into the future in bare feet. I felt kind of embarrassed for him.

Anyway, they were engaged, and now they must be married, so I guess she had slippers waiting for him. I’m just sorry I missed the wedding.

# SERVICE ELEVATOR, by Sam Merwin, Jr.

Originally published in *Amazing Stories*, November 1958.

There were times when Jerry Hale wondered how he had ever managed to work himself into such a job—and this was one of those times. Essentially, Jerry was a contact man, a salesman, a promoter, a man who used an office only as a mail-drop and a place to take an occasional telephone call. So here he was, as he had been for the past two years, chained to a desk in an office of Research Development, Inc. The fact that it was a magnificent blond-mahogany desk in a magnificent blond-mahogany office fitted with every conceivable gadget for modern material comfort, from soundproofed ceiling to built-in bar, didn't alter the basic harsh truth of incarceration.

"I'm only a prisoner in a blond-mahogany cage, an unbeautiful thing to see..."

He hadn't meant to say it aloud, but he must have. Rhoda Carlin's sleek strawberry-blonde head came up from contemplation of the stenographer's pad on her knee, and her lush, vermillion lips said with only the faintest trace of mockery, "You want me to put that in the letter to Mr. Finkelberg, Jerry?"

"If I told you where I'd like you to put it, the crash of your illusions would shatter the silence of this mausoleum," he told her.

"You worry about Mr. Finkelberg, and I'll worry about my illusions—what's left of them," was the devastating retort.

As he resumed dictation, Jerry realized with a slight taste of ashes that Rhoda was one reason for his self-incarceration. Rhoda was a looker, all the way down. She was prompt, reliable, level headed and efficient. She was also insolent, overbearing, and possessed of a remarkably even disposition—as far as Jerry had been able to discern in the course of their two-year association, it was always bad.

The only times he had seen her smile were when something went wrong—preferably painfully for him, like the occasion when he had been bushwhacked by the wastebasket and removed a strip of veneer from his desk with the bridge on his nose. That time, he had actually heard through dazed ears, the peal of her silvery laughter.

It had become a game with him to make her laugh again—preferably without agony for himself. But he had thus far failed. His most carefully thought-out efforts to win her approval were received with sublime indifference. He had wanted to date her from the first

moment she walked into R-D, Inc.—but how did you go about dating a girl who obviously zoned you somewhere between a square and a moldy fig? There were moments when he almost wished he weren't in love with Rhoda.

The letter to Mr. Finkelberg finished, he said, "What else is on the docket, Rhoda?"

She had already risen, revealing in the process the utterly luscious figure that had put the frustrating word drool into his dreams. Glancing at him over her shoulder, she replied, "Mr. Doheny wants to see you for a moment—and that Willy character is waiting outside."

There was a flash of something—was it gloat or mere incipient triumph?—in the slightly tilted violet eyes that warned him nothing pleasant lay in store for him.

He said, "Okay, Rhoda, tell Park I'm free if he wants to see me. I'll buzz you to send Mr. Willy in the moment I'm through."

She shrugged as she reached for the doorknob. Jerry could have sworn she muttered something suspiciously like, "Means nothing to me." Rhoda's attitude was as expressive as any words, so he couldn't be sure. He thought, *Some day, you fresh witch—some day*, but he wasn't really very confident. Two years could constitute quite a wilting process.

Parker Doheny popped in. He was round, rosy and, as usual, a-burble with enthusiasm. He was also Jerry's partner and the real reason for his having to stay chained to a desk. Parker was an awesomely brilliant idea man and all-around scientist—with about as much practical money or business sense as a child of two. The very thought of taking a trip and leaving Park in charge gave Jerry gooseflesh—it gave him visions of hard-won capital flowing into bottomless funnels labeled Perpetual Motion or Portable Hole or Vegetable Metals. So it was Park Doheny who took the trips while Jerry sweated things out, chained to his desk and Rhoda's sneers.

Research Development, Inc., was exactly what it sounded like. The purpose of the firm was to put inventors—or scientific idea men, as Jerry preferred to call them—in touch with laboratories or commercial firms where their ideas could be developed and put to use and profit. It was a small but successful and rapidly growing outfit. It filled a basic need, not only for scientists, but for firms whose budgets did not run to vast outlays for free research.

Park Doheny was glowing. With totally false modesty, he laid upon Jerry's desk what looked like a certified check on lingerie-pink paper. It was a certified check from the Magnum Corporation, made out to Research Development, Inc., in the amount of \$50,000.02.

Jerry was impressed, although he had no desire to show it. "What are the two cents for?" he asked mildly.

"I've been wondering, myself," said Doheny blandly. "Well, this time old woolly-head, as I understand from Miss Carlin you have been heard to call me, came through. This is for that little unrefillable bottle top you told me would never sell. It will cover our outlay to Garretson, pay him a fat fee, and leave us five grand commission."

"Nice going, Park," said Jerry sincerely. He added solemnly, "Not even I can be right all the time." No wonder, he thought, Rhoda had been more superior than usual—she knew he had screamed his head off when Park took on Garretson and his unrefillable bottle top.

The buzzer sounded. He flipped the switch and Rhoda's dulcet vitriol sounded in his ears. "Mr. Willy is getting impatient," she said. "Shall I send him in?"

It was a tactless blunder—if it was a blunder. Right at the moment when his impractical partner was indulging in a bit of deserved self-inflation, she had to remind them both of Jerry's worst error in judgment—and most expensive—since the foundation of R-D, Inc.

Doheny moved toward the door, carrying his check. On the threshold, he paused and said, "I'll have Rhoda bank this if you don't need her for a moment." Then he added, "It may cover some of the expenses you've incurred with your friend Amos Willy."

For once, Jerry could think of nothing to say.

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Amos Willy entered and sat down quietly in the blond-leather armchair facing Jerry at one side of his desk. Looking at him, Jerry knew, as always, that here was the utterly dedicated man. Dedication shone from his slightly myopic eyes, from the wild, unshorn disorder of his hair, from his frayed shirt-collar and well-worn tweeds, from the scuffed, unshined toes of his loafers. It was this dedication, this integrity, that had sold Jerry on Amos Willy from the first time that virtually unknown scientist had worked his way shyly through the office door. As he had told Park Doheny, "I may not know a damned thing about rhodomagnetics, but I pride myself on knowing a little about men. I'm backing Amos Willy all the way."

The word "rhodomagnetics!" had emerged as a snort from Roheny's scientifically solid nostrils. "They're still a hundred years away."

"Maybe," Jerry had replied. "But I'd like to be able to hang a picture to my wall without having to screw a hole in the plaster—"

His partner had rolled his eyes toward heaven, thrown up his hands and walked out, muttering something about, "And he thinks I'm screwy!"

Amos Willy rested a suede-patched elbow on Jerry's desk and said. "This is just a progress report, Mr. Hale. I think you ought to know

I've achieved a three milligram attraction between a gram of silicon and ten grams of fuller's earth."

"This is important?" Jerry asked, not unkindly.

"It's the first concrete success I've attained," said Amos Willy, his dedicated eyes ablaze. "It's proof I haven't been barking down the wrong well."

Jerry restrained an almost irresistible impulse to unscramble the metaphor and said, "That's wonderful, Amos. Any chance of giving me a demonstration? My partner seems to feel that you've essayed the impossible."

The scientist hesitated, looked his confusion, blushed, stammered, finally said, "You've trusted me, Mr. Hale, so it's only fair that I should trust you. I've been doing my best to keep my personal expenses low, since my experimental and research work have been so expensive. I..." He hesitated, then said, "When can you come?"

"Right now, if it's okay with you," said Jerry, delighted at the chance of escaping, however briefly, the gloats of his partner and Rhoda Carlin.

Amos Willy hesitated again. "You may find it—well, not quite what you expect," he said.

Jerry came around the desk and laid a friendly hand on the scientist's back. "I may be a heel," he said. "At any rate, I've been called one by experts. But nobody ever called me a snob."

"And you won't tell a soul?" Amos Willy asked anxiously.

"Secrecy is part of the stock in trade of R-D, Inc.," Jerry assured him. "Without it, we'd be nowhere."

The scientist looked at Jerry doubtfully, then sighed and said, "Very well, come along then. But please don't go outdoors when we get there—you might be—er—noticed."

\* \* \* \*

Jerry was still trying to figure that one out when they hit the street and flagged a taxi. To get to Willy's laboratory, wherever it was, meant he would be outside—as he was bound to be when he left it. So how could he not go outside? He gave it up after a while and decided to let nature take its course.

While Amos Willy's laboratory was scarcely in a part of the city favored with frequent mention in the society gossip columns, it scarcely seemed a district where being noticed might cause difficulty. The cab pulled to a halt in front of what appeared to be an abandoned warehouse or loft building, one of many that lined the almost deserted street. Amos paid off the driver, who looked at the money suspiciously and said, "What kind of queer is this?"

Jerry stepped in and paid the fare himself—but not before noticing

that the bill the driver had returned to the scientist was one of the large, old-fashioned currency notes that had been pulled from circulation in the late 1920s. As Amos Willy unlocked a door at one end of the warehouse, he said, "Where did you get that bill, Amos? It looked almost new."

"It is new," said the scientist bafflingly. He led the way to what appeared to be a service elevator of ancient vintage, one that was operated by pulling on a cable of twisted wires. Before putting it in motion, he uncovered what looked like a ship's capstan, off in a corner of the lift. "This is something I thought up to help save expenses," he said. "The economics are quite extraordinary."

Puzzled, Jerry peered over his shoulder, saw him check a knob that appeared to register a set of numbers that reminded him of the numbers on a dashboard speedometer. It was turned to 1-8-9-1. The scientist ignored the cable, but said, "And now—we press this." He pushed a button on the left of the capstan, there was a brief sense of movement. "We're in the basement," he added, as he opened the lift door.

It was a large, old-fashioned basement, with a smell of damp ashes familiar since Jerry's childhood. He wondered a little that such a basement should lie under a warehouse—it looked more appropriate to a plain house, with its radiating furnace pipes just under the ceiling.

He forgot about this as Amos Willy led him to a wooden door, which he opened. This, it appeared, was his laboratory, and he ran through a demonstration of his silicon-fuller's earth rhodomagnetic attraction that left Jerry unimpressed, since he didn't really know much about the theory or practice of non-ferrous magnetism.

Then the inventor said, "Of course, my notes are all filed in my rooms upstairs. Would you mind coming up there? I'll scout around and make sure Mrs. Talbot and Dora are out of the way."

Puzzled, Jerry obeyed. He followed his client upstairs to the main floor, a hideous golden-oak, flowered-carpet, and stained-glass monstrosity, then up two more flights. It was, he thought, certainly an old-fashioned house. Then, with the force of a lightning bolt, he recalled that they were in a warehouse.

It didn't make sense—nor did Amos Willy's two rooms on the third floor front. Jerry turned shuddering eyes away from a birch-bark chromo inscribed, *God love our happy home*, then from a picture of some large antlered animal standing defiantly over the dying body of its mate. Ignoring his host, he went to the window and looked out.

They weren't even in the same part of the city—they weren't in the same era, unless Jerry had gone mad. He saw a stout gentleman pass slowly along the sidewalk on the other side of the street, wearing a

high-crowned derby with an absurdly rolled brim and a watch chain thick as a hawser across his brocaded waistcoat. He noted a pair of ladies in long skirts and—he gulped—*bustles*. He saw a boy in a Buster Brown suit roll a hoop slowly down the street in the opposite direction from an open victoria driven by a top-hatted coachman and inhabited by an elegant lady who lolled beneath a fringed parasol.

Only faintly did he hear Amos Willy repeat his name to get his attention. Turning on the inventor, he blazed, “Damn rhodomagnetics now, Amos! Is this a joke, or have you invented some sort of time-travel machine?”

The scientist looked mildly distressed. “It’s not exactly a matter of time travel,” he said. “The theory is simple enough once you understand it. I put the thing together to save money.”

“You did what?” Jerry discovered he was shouting.

“Well...” His vehemence had flustered the inventor. “You see, I knew I was costing you a lot of money, and what with the cost of living up so, it seemed economical to work this out. It cost very little, and the savings are enormous. My rooms only cost three dollars a week, and that includes breakfast. I can live like a king on less than fifty dollars a month. Look”—he turned toward the files that filled one wall of his paiior-study—“I have them all itemized.”

Jerry said, “Oh, my God!” and collapsed upon an elaborate chair of black walnut that looked as if it had been upholstered with horsehair—and that felt like horsehair when he sat on it. He said, to a distressed and bewildered Amos Willy, “What time—I mean, what date is it here?”

“Let me think,” said the scientist. “Why, it’s June, 1891. I’m not sure of the exact date. And I’m not sure it’s really a time-travel machine. You see—”

“Skip it,” said Jerry rudely. “I wouldn’t understand it anyway. But, man, don’t you realize what you’ve done? Don’t answer that—you evidently don’t. Can you get us back where we belong?”

“Of course,” said Amos, moving toward the door. “I hope you won’t spread our little secret.”

“Don’t worry,” said Jerry. “Who’d believe me if I tried?”

It was incredible, he thought as he followed Amos down the carpeted stairs. The man who had discovered time travel had used it to save money, not to make it. On the return trip, which was accomplished without incident, he paid close attention to the capstan.

“And that’s all there is to it?” he asked when they were back.

“That’s all there is to it,” the scientist repeated. “It’s really a very simple process, once the quantum mathematical theory behind it is understood. I got the idea one morning in the bathtub.”

“You’ve shown me a miracle,” said Jerry solemnly. “And you can



vary the date of arrival by turning that doodad?"

"I suppose so," said Amos. "I've never tried any other date. Why should I when I'm so well off where I am?"

"No reason at all," said Jerry.

They left the warehouse and walked toward the nearest avenue to pick up a cab. "I'm not sure this life you're leading is healthy," he told the scientist. "After all, this is the time you were born into. Surely, you have some interests here beyond your science—friends, a girl." He saw by Amos' blush that he had scored and put on the pitch. Amos had earned relaxation, a refresher, a vacation, a party. Jerry would take care of the precious inventions and experiments and see no harm come to them.

By the time they parted, Amos had his check for five hundred dollars and Jerry had the keys to the warehouse service elevator and the lodging house back in time.

"I'll take good care of them. Don't worry about a thing. Go out and have yourself a ball," he said as they parted.

"A ball?" said Amos. "What sort of a ball?"

Hurrying away, Jerry told himself, "You'll never know, sport."

It was not that Jerry had anything really nefarious in mind—at any rate, where the dedicated Amos Willy was concerned. He merely wanted to get back there, to 1891 and look around. After all, it was opportunity—fantastic opportunity—and Jerry was hardly the man to let its knock go unanswered.

\* \* \* \*

That night he lay awake in his Sutton Place bedroom, thinking, figuring, computing. For once, R-D, Inc., and its myriad problems were pushed into the hind-quarters of his mind.

The next morning, he called the office and told Rhoda to cancel his appointments until further notice. He was going to have to move—and move fast. There was no telling when the dedicated Amos might come wandering back from his hastily induced holiday.

Jerry spent the entire morning at the Public Library, delving into old almanacs and sports record books. Then he went downtown to the second-hand bookstore district and purchased a half-dozen books, dealing with horse-racing history, with baseball, with the operations of the stock-market, with general life in the early 1890's. By the time he was finished, it was past three o'clock and the banks were closed, so he returned to the office.

"Where have you been?" Rhoda asked him as he entered. "You must have gotten a million calls."

"How about Mr. Willy—did he call?" he asked, trying to hide from her the wholly masculine urge that all but overwhelmed him at sight

of her shoulders, throat, and upper bosom, revealed by a backless summer dress.

"No—that screwball's the only one who didn't," she told him. Then, after eyeing him curiously, "You sure you're all right, Jerry?"

"Huh? Who me? I'm fine," he told her.

He went in to his desk and tended to office affairs, though his heart was not in it. Twice, he almost told Park Doheny about Amos Willy's amazing discovery, but each time he managed to hold his tongue. Park would not believe him, and he had promised Amos to keep his secret secret. Every time he thought of it, Jerry could only wonder at a man so dedicated that he had invented a time machine simply to cut down living expenses while working out his theories on rhodomagnetics.

He was going to have to make his move the next day, so he was in and out of the office, completing his preparations. A theatrical costumer supplied him with a Gay Nineties outfit—complete from straw boater with elastic to suede-topped high-button shoes. He found it impossible to get paper money, so he invested in a hundred silver dollars, dated before 1890, and, for fabulous prices, managed to pick up another five hundred in properly dated twenty-dollar gold pieces. By the time he had all this assembled at the office, it was after five. Gathering his impedimenta, he bade Rhoda Carlin a polite farewell, rode down in the elevator and hired a cab to take him to the warehouse.

When he got out, another cab pulled up behind his and Rhoda emerged, revealing a breath-taking expanse of nylon leg. Wishing the silver dollars weren't quite so heavy, and that the box containing his costume weren't quite so awkward and bulky, Jerry waited until she came up to him.

"What's the idea?" he asked her.

"You left these at the office—I thought you might need them," said the girl. She handed him, without expression, the precious box that contained his gold pieces. Feeling slightly sick to his stomach over danger averted, Jerry thanked her.

Regarding him curiously, she said, "Have you gone stark, staring nuts—or what?"

"What difference does it make to you?" he asked her.

She regarded him gravely, then told him, "No girl likes to lose half a meal-ticket—even the treacherous, unreliable half."

"Treacherous—unreliable?" He was wounded to the quick.

"You're just like my old man," she said. "Mother never trusted him out of her sight." Then, looking curiously at their surroundings, "What are you doing in this crummy neighborhood?"

"Your friend, Amos Willy, has his laboratory inside," said Jerry. An

impulse, fortified by two years of longing frustration, was taking shape in his mind.

"What are you taking him beside gold?" Rhoda asked. "Birdseed?"

"Come along and find out," he told her, unlocking the door. He stood aside, holding his breath, while she hesitated.

Finally, with slightly wrinkled nose, she said, "I don't know which of us is crazier," and walked briskly inside. She looked around the service elevator with contempt while Jerry busied himself with the capstan, checking the numbers on the dial and praying that he was not doing anything wrong. Unquestionably, he decided, he must be out of his mind to take the girl with him. "But if this be insanity, then I be a happy lunatic," he told himself.

He looked up and around, just to make certain Rhoda was still with him, then gave a shout of alarm. She had her hands on the cable, seemed just about to give it a pull. "No! Don't!" he shouted, leaping for her. As he did so, the knob from the side of the capstan came away in his hand.

There was a lurch, a sickening, sideways movement, then an ominous, grinding crunch of metal. Jerry said, "Oh, my God!" and looked down to discover Rhoda's well-advertised charms pressed close against him, her large violet eyes looking up, frightened, into his.

"What happened?" she asked. "What did I do?" Realising where she was, she disengaged herself from him as if he had been a piece of chewing gum stuck to her shoe.

"I don't know—yet," he told her. Taking a deep breath, he opened the lift door—and felt a flood of relief at sight of the now-familiar old-fashioned cellar. "It's okay," he said. "Let's go quickly, don't linger."

They managed to sneak upstairs unobserved, although wheezy music from an old-fashioned upright foot-powered organ sounded from the parlor on the main floor, playing "Bringing in the Sheaves." Not until they were safely in Amos Willy's rooms did Jerry allow Rhoda to speak. Then she said, "It must be me that's crazy." She looked out the window, gave a little scream of alarm and said, "What is this—a movie set?"

Apparently, her scream was heard, for rapid footsteps were followed by a rapping on the door. "Mr. Willy! I'm surprised at you," said a sharp, feminine voice. "You know my rules about young ladies in the upstairs rooms."

"Mrs. Talbot?" Jerry turned on all the ingratiations he could muster. "This is Mr. Hale, Amos Willy's employer. He's going to be away a few days, and he offered his rooms to my bride and myself for a—" he looked at Rhoda helplessly—"for a honeymoon."

"Oh!" There was a blend of disapproval and romantic curiosity in the single syllable. Then, "Very well, I suppose it's all right, but I'll

have to double the rates.”

“I shall be down directly to settle the matter, I hope to your satisfaction,” said Jerry, feeling as if he were Alice, falling slowly down the White Rabbit’s hole. He waited until Mrs. Talbot’s footsteps on the stairs could no longer be heard, then said, “This isn’t a movie set, Rhoda. This is the real thing.”

She was regarding him speculatively. “Mrs. Jerry Hale,” she said dreamily.

He grabbed her by the shoulders. “Rhoda! Snap out of it! We busted Amos Willy’s time machine getting here. I don’t know how to get us back. We’re trapped.”

Her face was close to his. She said, “Shut up and kiss me.”

He did so—and again time performed a dizzy parabola. However, he pulled himself out of it in time to go into the bedroom and don the clothes he had purchased from the costumer, remembering to part his hair in the middle. Rhoda looked at him disbelievingly. “Jerry, dear,” she said, “hasn’t this silly joke gone on far enough?”

“It’s no joke,” he told her. He had been wondering if he hadn’t made a ghastly mistake in telling Mrs. Talbot that Rhoda was his wife. After all... However, looking at that lush, lovely face and figure, he felt his heart indulge in some odd but not unpleasant thumps. He had wanted this girl for two years. Now, she couldn’t leave the rooms if she wanted to—not without causing a riot in her 1956 clothes. An old phrase floated through his mind... “Once aboard the lugger, and the girl is mine.”

He was humming a little tune as he went downstairs to see Mrs. Talbot, carefully wiping off the stains of Rhoda’s lipstick around his mouth.

Mrs. Talbot proved charming, once she saw a ten-dollar gold piece, and even agreed to bring them a little supper. Jerry continued to hum as he ran up the stairs. “Once aboard the lugger...”

\* \* \* \*

The supper proved to be incredibly ample and extremely good—but Jerry spent the night on the horsehair sofa, while Rhoda slept peacefully on the bed in the next room. She had killed his ideas in exactly two syllables—“No soap!”

The following afternoon, with Rhoda wearing an ill-fitting ready-made dress that Jerry had managed to purchase for her at a large department store, they were married at the city registry—an absurdly quaint, gas-lit structure of red-brick that, in their own time, had long since been replaced by a towering municipal skyscraper.

Rhoda went through the ceremony gravely. Not until they were ensconced in a hansom cab, with the horse trotting noisily over a

cobbled pavement, did she say, "I'd almost given up here." Snuggling close to him, she murmured, "Jerry, I'm so happy."

"I'm a little stunned," said Jerry, slipping an arm about familiar shoulders covered with unfamiliar ruffles. "Why did you give me the brush for so long, honey?"

"Because," she told him, "you didn't have marriage in mind."

\* \* \* \*

The following day, they moved from Mrs. Talbot's house to a large hotel. For fifteen dollars a week, Jerry rented the bridal suite, complete with its gray marble private bathroom. Rhoda spent the next few days shopping, while Jerry moved about the city, making the connections he wanted. It was not as simple as he had expected, but he was not a man to be denied. On the fourth day, they took a chugging steam train that conveyed them, along with a mixed crowd in holiday mood, to an ornate racetrack on the outskirts of town.

"Who's that man—the one who nodded to you?" Rhoda asked curiously as they took their places in a grandstand box close to the finish line. "The one with the handlebar mustache."

"Oh—" said Jerry. "That's Mr. Watson, Mr. Phil Watson from Philadelphia. We have a little wager on the fifth race—the Vanderlip Silver Cup. He believes a horse called Shoo-in is going to win." Jerry found he was beginning to like Rhoda, even without lipstick. But then, he told himself, he would have liked her tattooed blue.

"And Shoo-in isn't going to win?" she asked him quaintly.

He patted the little book in his pocket. "Not unless history is wrong," he replied confidently.

He bet mildly, disinterestedly, on the first four races, since he had no record of them, managed to do a little better than break even. He placed another bet, with a bookmaker, on Breakaway, the long-odds filly scheduled to take the big race. He and Rhoda were on their feet, yelling their heads off, when Breakaway caught Shoo-in in the home stretch and won, going away, by half a length.

"We won! You did it!" Rhoda shouted in his ear, her arms around his neck. Then, restraining herself. "How much?"

"About eleven thousand," he told her proudly.

"Wonderful!" she replied. "Then I can buy that Worth copy at Mr. Wanamaker's tomorrow."

"You can buy the original," he told her grandly, biting off the end of a Corona Corona.

*Women!* he thought. *Bless 'em!*

A few minutes later, Mr. Philip Watson from Philadelphia entered the box, shook hands with Rhoda and pulled a number of orange-backed gold certificates from an exceedingly plump wallet. "I don't

know how you called that one, Hale,” he told Jerry. “But you earned this.” He put the money into Jerry’s waiting hands, then added with a speculative gleam in his little eyes. “The Diamond Tray comes up next week—how about giving me a chance to win some of it back?”

“Who do you like?” Jerry asked him.

Mr. Watson hesitated, then shrugged and said, “I’ve got a gelding going for me that should be about ready, a colt I picked up at the Louisville auction last year. Of course, she’s a slow starter, and mighty green, but I feel I ought to back her—purely out of sentiment, of course.”

Jerry laughed and said, “Sentiment, my eye! What’s his name?”

“Carryall,” said Mr. Phil Watson.

“Just a moment,” said Jerry. Turning away, he got out the record book in his pocket, shielding it carefully from prying eyes. He found the Diamond Tray Stakes, checked 1891. The winner, unless history lied again, was a nag called Footless. He put away the little book and turned to close the deal. Mr. Watson sighed and turned away.

“Such a sad little man,” said Rhoda with sympathy—to Jerry’s amazement, she actually had sympathy now that he had finally come to know her in a biblical, as well as in a professional, sense.

“He’s only worth about five million bucks,” Jerry told her, unfeelingly. “Made it in cod liver oil.”

“Such a sad little millionaire then,” said his wife. Then, wriggling uncomfortably, “Take me home, honey. These damned stays are cutting me in two.”

\* \* \* \*

He didn’t see much of Rhoda while the sun was up the next week. His affairs kept him busy during the day—there were so many people to meet, so many things to do, so many places to go—but she didn’t seem discontented. They dined in state, visited the theaters, had happy nights of love. To his surprise, when Diamond Tray Stakes day came around, Rhoda pleaded a headache and refused to go with him.

That was the day the blow fell. Footless was running well in front of the field as they rounded the home turn, but then the horse skidded and actually fell down, throwing its jockey almost to the outer rail. While Jerry looked on in disbelief and mounting horror, the rest of the field swept past his choice and came home, with Carryall nicely in front.

“I’ll have to get the balance from the bank tomorrow,” said Jerry, handing over the contents of his wallet—a little matter of ten thousand dollars, which was only half the amount of the bet.

Philip Watson’s little eyes were like twin diamond bits boring into him. Jerry didn’t think he had ever seen anything quite so hard. The

sportsman said in tones made all the more menacing because they were gentler by far than his normal speech, "Have the money at my office before noon, or you may find matters a trifle unpleasant." Before turning away, he added, "Please convey my regards to your beautiful lady."

"By all means," said Jerry, in a fog of bewilderment laced with fear. This was disaster in more ways than one—for very evidently either history did lie, or he and Rhoda were not in the past of the same world into which they had been born.

Riding back to the city, Jerry tried desperately to figure it out. He wished he had listened more attentively to what Amos Willy had tried to tell him about the machine. Something about its not being exactly a time-travel instrument...

Jerry knew the theory of parallel time-tracks, although, until this moment, he had never before given it much attention. It involved—but to hell with theory. Fantastic or not, he was stuck with hard fact, caught in a past whose future he could not predict. Worse, there was no way out. He still had about twelve hundred in the bank—hardly enough to satisfy Phil Watson, but enough to take Rhoda and himself out of the city and give them a stake in this world where a dollar went such a long way.

Somehow, memory of Watson's diamond-drill eyes told him that wouldn't work. And, if the dollar in this world went a long way, it was also correspondingly difficult to make. Five thousand dollars a year meant prosperity—but, to earn it, a man had to put in six long days of labor. If he could find a job that paid that much...

He wondered what Phil Watson had meant by the ominous words, "a trifle unpleasant"—and decided he didn't want to stick around and find out. The hotel would cash a check for him, and he and Rhoda could be off that night. He thought longingly of the security of his blond-mahogany desk back at R-D, Inc., somewhere in time, on some other world, and cursed Amos Willy and all his works. Then he began to wonder how Rhoda was going to take the bad news.

\* \* \* \*

She was waiting for him in the lobby of the hotel when he got there, and she already knew some of it. She said, "I know you lost your shirt, Jerry." She sounded a little like the Rhoda of old—the fearsome Rhoda of the outer office.

"Not so loud!" he muttered furtively. "I don't want it to get around here."

"It's already around," she told him. "When Philadelphia Phil—yes, that's what they call your 'nice' Mr. Watson—When Philadelphia Phil makes a killing, everybody knows about it."

“Philadelphia Phil?” Somewhere, in Jerry’s memory, a gong reverberated. Philadelphia Phil—why, that would be this world’s version of Pittsburgh Phil, the most famous and ruthless big-time race-track winner of his own and Rhoda’s world. He sank onto a settee and mopped his brow with a handkerchief.

Rhoda stood over him. “Well, Jerry, what are you going to do?” she asked quietly. “You know you haven’t the money to pay him.”

He took her hands in his, like a drowning man clutching twin life-preservers, said in a low voice, “We’re going to cash a check and get out of here—tonight.”

“Are we?” she asked. “I don’t think so.” She nodded toward a couple of extremely sporty looking, and extremely tough looking, characters, who were lounging close to the entrance to the men’s bar, their gimlet eyes fixed on him. “These gentlemen have been waiting for your arrival. I overheard them talking to the clerk.”

“Oh, my God!” gasped Jerry. “What am I going to do? I’m sorry I got you into this, honey—only I’m not sorry about us.”

“You mean that, Jerry?” Her voice, briefly, was tender.

“I mean it,” he told her. “Then this is what we’re going to do,” she told him firmly. “We’re going to pay Mr. Watson tonight in full.”

“With what?” he asked her, astonished.

“With this.” She plunged a hand into her reticule and pulled from it a thick roll of bills. “Then you’re going to work—for me.”

“I don’t understand,” he told her. “How...?”

She said, “While you’ve been wasting your time and money trying to make a dishonest killing, I’ve been busy trying to do the women of this world a little good—and make an honest profit.”

“But with what?” he asked her, still unable to credit his senses. “How can you do women some good?”

She wriggled uncomfortably and said, “I’m getting them out of these horrible stays. I’ve been going out of my mind in them. So I took my panty girdle to a manufacturer and made a deal. The patent is already applied for, and I’m going into business—only you are going into it with me and see that our interest is protected.”

He looked at her with awe, “You mean...” he began.

“I mean,” she said firmly, “that from now on, there will be no more betting—except maybe a little, for fun. It’s going to take all I got today—ten thousand—to pull you out of this hole. That will leave us a little to keep going on. The rest is up to you.”

“You doll!” he said fervently. “You violet-eyed wonder!” He moved to embrace her, right there in the lobby.

“No more bets?” she managed before his lips sealed hers.

“No more bets,” he whispered.

The sound of a throat-clearing behind him brought him out of his



rapture. He turned to see a bedraggled-looking Amos Willy standing there.

Amos said, "Mr. Hale—Miss Carlin—thank God, I've found you. Mr. Doheny is going out of his mind."

"It will never miss him," said Rhoda. "And the name is not Miss Carlin—it's Mrs. Hale." Then, "Mr. Willy! How did you ever...?"

"It wasn't easy," was the reply. "I had to take the whole machine to pieces and put it together again. What did you do to it, Mr. Hale? It was all warped."

"Never mind," said Jerry. "You did it."

"We should be getting back," said Amos. "It's taken me several days to find you here, and Mr. Doheny is really worried."

The nightmare was over. Jerry felt as if the weight of the ages had been lifted from his shoulders. He said, "I'm sorry about the machine, Amos, but, since you've fixed it." He turned toward Rhoda, added, "Come on, honey. Let's go."

"We're not going back." The words were low-pitched but unmistakably firm. "We have our roots down here."

"Not going back?" Jerry was incredulous. "But, honey, we don't belong here—not really. In our own time, in our own world—"

"In our own time, in our own world, I'm Miss Carlin, not Mrs. Hale. I'm a stenographer, not a capitalist, a—a babe, not a lady. Besides, you promised..."

"That's right," said Jerry. "I did." He looked at his wife for a long moment, then turned to Amos Willy and said, "Sorry, chum, you heard what the lady said."

"But what will I tell Mr. Doheny?" the inventor asked helplessly, his myopic, dedicated eyes ablink.

"Tell Mr. Doheny," said Rhoda, "to find himself a new partner—and a new secretary." She smiled at Jerry and said, "Shall we have dinner now, darling?"

# RECRUIT FOR ANDROMEDA, by Milton Lesser

## CHAPTER I

When the first strong sunlight of May covered the tree-arched avenues of Center City with green, the riots started.

The people gathered in angry knots outside the city hall, met in the park and littered its walks with newspapers and magazines as they gobbled up editorial comment at a furious rate, slipped with dark of night through back alleys and planned things with furious futility. Center City's finest knew when to make themselves scarce: their uniforms stood for everything objectionable at this time and they might be subjected to clubs, stones, taunts, threats, leers—and knives.

But Center City, like most communities in United North America, had survived the Riots before and would survive them again. On past performances, the damage could be estimated, too. Two-hundred fifty-seven plate glass windows would be broken, three-hundred twelve limbs fractured. Several thousand people would be treated for minor bruises and abrasions, Center City would receive half that many damage suits. The list had been drawn clearly and accurately; it hardly ever deviated.

And Center City would meet its quota. With a demonstration of reluctance, of course. The healthy approved way to get over social trauma once every seven-hundred eighty days.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Shut it off, Kit. Kit, please."

The telio blared in a cheaply feminine voice, "Oh, it's a long way to nowhere, forever. And your honey's not coming back, never, never, never...." A wailing trumpet represented flight.

"They'll exploit anything, Kit."

"It's just a song."

"Turn it off, please."

Christopher Temple turned off the telio, smiling. "They'll announce the names in ten minutes," he said, and felt the corners of his mouth draw taut.

"Tell me again, Kit," Stephanie pleaded. "How old are you?"

"You know I'm twenty-six."

"Twenty-six. Yes, twenty-six, so if they don't call you this time, you'll be safe. Safe, I can hardly believe it."

“Nine minutes,” said Temple in the darkness. Stephanie had drawn the blinds earlier, had dialed for sound-proofing. The screaming in the streets came to them as not the faintest whisper. But the song which became briefly, masochistically popular every two years and two months had spoiled their feeling of seclusion.

“Tell me again, Kit.”

“What.”

“You know what.”

He let her come to him, let her hug him fiercely and whimper against his chest. He remained passive although it hurt, occasionally stroking her hair. He could not assert himself for another—he looked at his strap chrono—for another eight minutes. He might regret it, if he did, for a lifetime.

“Tell me, Kit.”

“I’ll marry you, Steffy. In eight minutes, less than eight minutes, I’ll go down and get the license. We’ll marry as soon as it’s legal.”

“This is the last time they have a chance for you. I mean, they won’t change the law?”

Temple shook his head. “They don’t have to. They meet their quota this way.”

“I’m scared.”

“You and everyone else in North America, Steffy.”

She was trembling against him. “It’s cold for June.”

“It’s warm in here.” He kissed her moist eyes, her nose, her lips.

“Oh God, Kit. Five minutes.”

“Five minutes to freedom,” he said jauntily. He did not feel that way at all. Apprehension clutched at his chest with tight, painful fingers, almost making it difficult for him to breathe.

“Turn it on, Kit.”

He dialed the telio in time to see the announcer’s insincere smile. Smile seventeen, Kit thought wryly. Patriotic sacrifice.

“Every seven-hundred eighty days,” said the announcer, “two-hundred of Center City’s young men are selected to serve their country for an indeterminate period regulated rigidly by a rotation system.”

“Liar!” Stephanie cried. “No one ever comes back. It’s been thirty years since the first group and not one of them....”

“Shh,” Temple raised a finger to his lips.

“This is the thirteenth call since the inception of what is popularly referred to as the Nowhere Journey,” said the announcer. “Obviously, the two hundred young men from Center City and the thousands from all over this hemisphere do not in reality embark on a Journey to Nowhere. That is quite meaningless.”

“Hooray for him,” Temple laughed.

“I wish he’d get on with it.”

"No, ladies and gentlemen, we use the word Nowhere merely because we are not aware of the ultimate destination. Security reasons make it impossible to...."

"Yes, yes," said Stephanie impatiently. "Go on."

"...therefore, the Nowhere Journey. With a maximum security lid on the whole project, we don't even know why our men are sent, or by what means. We know only that they go somewhere and not nowhere, bravely and not fearfully, for a purpose vital to the security of this nation and not to slake the thirst of a chessman of regiments and divisions.

"If Center City's contribution helps keep our country strong, Center City is naturally obligated...."

"No one ever said it isn't our duty," Stephanie argued, as if the announcer could indeed hear her. "We only wish we knew something about it—and we wish it weren't forever."

"It isn't forever," Temple reminded her. "Not officially."

"Officially, my foot. If they never return, they never return. If there's a rotation system on paper, but it's never used, that's not a rotation system at all. Kit, it's forever."

"...to thank the following sponsors for relinquishing their time...."

"No one would want to sponsor *that*," Temple whispered cheerfully.

"Kit," said Stephanie, "I—I suddenly have a hunch we have nothing to worry about. They missed you all along and they'll miss you this time, too. The last time, and then you'll be too old. That's funny, too old at twenty-six. But we'll be free, Kit. Free."

"He's starting," Temple told her.

A large drum filled the entire telio screen. It rotated slowly from bottom to top. In twenty seconds, the letter A appeared, followed by about a dozen names. Abercrombie, Harold. Abner, Eugene. Adams, Gerald. Sorrow in the Abercrombie household. Despair for the Abners. Black horror for Adams.

The drum rotated.

"They're up to F, Kit."

Fabian, Gregory G....

Names circled the drum slowly, live viscous alphabet soup. Meaningless, unless you happened to know them.

"Kit, I knew Thomas Mulvany."

N, O, P....

"It's hot in here."

"I thought you were cold."

"I'm suffocating now."

R, S....

"T!" Stephanie shrieked as the names began to float slowly up from the bottom of the drum.

Tabor, Tebbets, Teddley...

Temple's mouth felt dry as a ball of cotton. Stephanie laughed nervously. Now—or never. Never?

Now.

Stephanie whimpered despairingly.

TEMPLE, CHRISTOPHER.

\* \* \* \*

"Sorry I'm late, Mr. Jones."

"Hardly, Mr. Smith. Hardly. Three minutes late."

"I've come in response to your ad."

"I know. You look old."

"I am over twenty-six. Do you mind?"

"Not if you don't, Mr. Smith. Let me look at you. Umm, you seem the right height, the right build."

"I meet the specifications exactly."

"Good, Mr. Smith. And your price."

"No haggling," said Smith. "I have a price which must be met."

"Your price, Mr. Smith?"

"Ten million dollars."

The man called Jones coughed nervously. "That's high."

"Very. Take it or leave it."

"In cash?"

"Definitely. Small unmarked bills."

"You'd need a moving van!"

"Then I'll get one."

"Ten million dollars," said Jones, "is quite a price. Admittedly, I haven't dealt in this sort of traffic before, but—"

"But nothing. Were your name Jones, really and truly Jones, I might ask less."

"Sir?"

"You are Jones exactly as much as I am Smith."

"Sir?" Jones gasped again.

Smith coughed discreetly. "But I have one advantage. I know you. You don't know me, Mr. Arkalion."

"Eh? Eh?"

"Arkalion. The North American Carpet King. Right?"

"How did you know?" the man whose name was not Jones but Arkalion asked the man whose name was not Smith but might as well have been.

"When I saw your ad," said not-Smith, "I said to myself, 'now here must be a very rich, influential man.' It only remained for me to study a series of photographs readily obtainable—I have a fine memory for that, Mr. Arkalion—and here you are; here is Arkalion the Carpet

King.”

“What will you do with the ten million dollars?” demanded Arkalion, not minding the loss nearly so much as the ultimate disposition of his fortune.

“Why, what does anyone do with ten million dollars? Treasure it. Invest it. Spend it.”

“I mean, what will you do with it if you are going in place of my—” Arkalion bit his tongue.

“Your son, were you saying, Mr. Arkalion? Alaric Arkalion the Third. Did you know that I was able to boil my list of men down to thirty when I studied their family ties?”

“Brilliant, Mr. Smith. Alaric is so young—”

“Aren’t they all? Twenty-one to twenty-six. Who was it who once said something about the flower of our young manhood?”

“Shakespeare?” said Mr. Arkalion realizing that most quotes of lasting importance came from the bard.

“Sophocles,” said Smith. “But no matter. I will take young Alaric’s place for ten million dollars.”

Motives always troubled Mr. Arkalion, and thus he pursued what might have been a dangerous conversation. “You’ll never get a chance to spend it on the Nowhere Journey.”

“Let me worry about that.”

“No one ever returns.”

“My worry, not yours.”

“It is forever—as if you dropped out of existence. Alaric is so young.”

“I have always gambled, Mr. Arkalion. If I do not return in five years, you are to put the money in a trust fund for certain designated individuals, said fund to be terminated the moment I return. If I come back within the five years, you are merely to give the money over to me. Is that clear?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll want it in writing, of course.”

“Of course. A plastic surgeon is due here in about ten minutes, Mr. Smith, and we can get on with.... But if I don’t know your name, how can I put it in writing?”

Smith smiled. “I changed my name to Smith for the occasion. Perfectly legal. My name is John X. Smith—now!”

“That’s where you’re wrong,” said Mr. Arkalion as the plastic surgeon entered. “Your name is Alaric Arkalion III—*now*.”

The plastic surgeon skittered around Smith, examining him minutely with the casual expertness that comes with experience.

“Have to shorten the cheek bones.”

“For ten million dollars,” said Smith, “you can take the damned

things out altogether and hang them on your wall.”

\* \* \* \*

Sophia Androvna Petrovitch made her way downtown through the bustle of tired workers and the occasional sprinkling of Comrades. She crushed her *ersatz* cigarette underfoot at number 616 Stalin Avenue, paused for the space of five heartbeats at the door, went inside.

“What do you want?” The man at the desk was myopic but bull-necked.

Sophia showed her party card.

“Oh, Comrade. Still, you are a woman.”

“You’re terribly observant, Comrade,” said Sophia coldly. “I am here to volunteer.”

“But a woman.”

“There is nothing in the law which says a woman cannot volunteer.”

“We don’t make women volunteer.”

“I mean really volunteer, of her own free will.”

“Her—own—free will?” The bull-necked man removed his spectacles, scratched his balding head with the ear-pieces. “You mean volunteer without—”

“Without coercion. I want to volunteer. I am here to volunteer. I want to sign on for the next Stalintrek.”

“Stalintrek, a woman?”

“That is what I said.”

“We don’t force women to volunteer.” The man scratched some more.

“Oh, really,” said Sophia. “This is 1992, not mid-century, Comrade. Did not Stalin say, ‘Woman was created to share the glorious destiny of Mother Russia with her mate?’” Sophia created the quote randomly.

“Yes, if Stalin said—”

“He did.”

“Still, I do not recall—”

“What?” Sophia cried. “Stalin dead these thirty-nine years and you don’t recall his speeches? What is your name, Comrade?”

“Please, Comrade. Now that you remind me, I remember.”

“What is your name.”

“Here, I will give you the volunteer papers to sign. If you pass the exams, you will embark on the next Stalintrek, though why a beautiful young woman like you—”

“Shut your mouth and hand me those papers.”

There, sitting behind that desk, was precisely why. Why should she, Sophia Androvna Petrovitch, wish to volunteer for the Stalintrek? Better to ask why a bird flies south in the winter, one day ahead of the

first icy gale. Or why a lemming plunges recklessly into the sea with his multitudes of fellows, if, indeed, the venture were to turn out grimly.

But there, behind that desk, was part of the reason. The Comrade. The bright sharp Comrade, with his depth of reasoning, his fountain of gushing emotions, his worldliness. *Pfooey!*

It was as if she had been in a cocoon all her life, stifled, starved, the cottony inner lining choking her whenever she opened her mouth, the leathery outer covering restricting her when she tried to move. No one had ever returned from the Stalintrek. She then had to assume no one would. Including Sophia Androvna Petrovitch. But then, there was nothing she would miss, nothing to which she particularly wanted to return. Not the stark, foul streets of Stalingrad, not the workers with their vapid faces or the Comrades with their cautious, sweating, trembling, fearful non-decisions, not the higher echelon of Comrades, more frightened but showing it less, who would love the beauty of her breasts and loins but not herself for you never love anything but the Stalinimage and Mother Russia herself, not those terrified martinet-marionettes who would love the parts of her if she permitted but not her or any other person for that matter.

Wrong with the Stalintrek was its name alone, a name one associated with everything else in Russia for an obvious, post-Stalin reason. But everything else about the Stalintrek shrieked mystery and adventure. Where did you go? How did you get there? What did you do? Why?

A million questions which had kept her awake at night and, if she thought about them hard enough, satisfied her deep longing for something different. And then one day when stolid Mrs. Ivanovna-Rasnikov had said, "It is a joke, a terrible, terrible joke they are taking my husband Fyodor on the Stalintrek when he lacks sufficient imagination to go from here to Leningrad or even Tula. Can you picture Fyodor on the Stalintrek? Better they should have taken me. Better they should have taken his wife." That day Sophia could hardly contain herself.

As a party member she had access to the law and she read it three times from start to finish (in her dingy flat by the light of a smoking, foul-smelling, soft-wax candle) but could find nothing barring women from the Stalintrek.

Had Fyodor Rasnikov volunteered? Naturally. Everyone volunteered, although when your name was called you had no choice. There had been no draft in Russia since the days of the Second War of the People's Liberation. Volunteer? What, precisely, did the word mean?

She, Sophia Androvna Petrovitch would volunteer, without being



told. Thus it was she found herself at 616 Stalin Avenue, and thus the balding, myopic, bull-necked Comrade thrust the papers across his desk at her.

She signed her name with such vehemence and ferocity that she almost tore through the paper.

## CHAPTER II

*Three-score men sit in the crowded, smoke-filled room. Some drink beer, some squat in moody silence, some talk in an animated fashion about nothing very urgent. At the one small door, two guards pace back and forth slowly, creating a gentle swaying of smoke-patterns in the hazy room. The guards, in simple military uniform, carry small, deadly looking weapons.*

FIRST MAN: Fight City Hall? Are you kidding? They took you, bud. Don't try to fight it, I know. I know.

SECOND MAN: I'm telling you, there was a mistake in the records. I'm over twenty-six. Two weeks and two days. Already I wrote to my Congressman. Hell, that's why I voted for him, he better go to bat for me.

THIRD MAN: You think that's something? I wouldn't be here only those doctors are crazy. I mean, crazy. Me, with a cyst big as a golf ball on the base of my spine.

FIRST MAN: You too. Don't try to fight it.

FOURTH MAN: (Newly named Alaric Arkalion III) I look forward to this as a stimulating adventure. Does the fact that they select men for the Nowhere Journey once every seven hundred and eighty days strike anyone as significant?

SECOND MAN: I got my own problems.

ALARIC ARKALION: This is not a thalamic problem, young man. Not thalamic at all.

THIRD MAN: Young man? Who are you kidding?

ALARIC ARKALION: (Who realizes, thanks to the plastic surgeon, he is the youngest looking of all, with red cheeks and peachfuzz whiskers) It is a problem of the intellect. Why seven hundred and eighty days?

FIRST MAN: I read the magazine, too, chief. You think we're all going to the planet Mars. How original.

ALARIC ARKALION: As a matter of fact, that is exactly what I think.

SECOND MAN: Mars?

FIRST MAN: (Laughing) It's a long way from Mars to City Hall, doc.

SECOND MAN: You mean, through space to Mars?

ALARIC ARKALION: Exactly, exactly. Quite a coincidence, otherwise.

FIRST MAN: You're telling me.

ALARIC ARKALION: (Coldly) Would you care to explain it?

FIRST MAN: Why, sure. You see, Mars is—uh, I don't want to steal your thunder, chief. Go ahead.

ALARIC ARKALION: Once every seven hundred and eighty days Mars and the Earth find themselves in the same orbital position with respect to the sun. In other words, Mars and Earth are closest then. Were there such a thing as space travel, new, costly, not thoroughly tested, they would want to make each journey as brief as possible. Hence the seven hundred and eighty days.

FIRST MAN: Not bad, chief. You got most of it.

THIRD MAN: No one ever said anything about space travel.

FIRST MAN: You think we'd broadcast it or something, stupid? It's part of a big, important scientific experiment, only we're the hamsters.

ALARIC ARKALION: Ridiculous. You're forgetting all about the Cold War.

FIRST MAN: He thinks we're fighting a war with the Martians. (Laughs) Orson Wells stuff, huh?

ALARIC ARKALION: With the Russians. The Russians. We developed A bombs. They developed A bombs. We came up with the H bomb. So did they. We placed a station up in space, a fifth of the way to the moon. So did they. Then—nothing more about scientific developments. For over twenty years. I ask you, doesn't it seem peculiar?

FIRST MAN: Peculiar, he says.

ALARIC ARKALION: Peculiar.

SECOND MAN: I wish my Congressman....

FIRST MAN: You and your Congressman. The way you talk, it was your vote got him in office.

SECOND MAN: If only I could get out and talk to him.

ALARIC ARKALION: No one is permitted to leave.

FIRST MAN: Punishable by a prison term, the law says.

SECOND MAN: Oh yeah? Prison, shmision. Or else go on the Nowhere Journey. Well, I don't see the difference.

FIRST MAN: So, go ahead. Try to escape.

SECOND MAN: (Looking at the guards) They got them all over. All over. I think our mail is censored.

ALARIC ARKALION: It is.

SECOND MAN: They better watch out. I'm losing my temper. I get violent when I lose my temper.

FIRST MAN: See? See how the guards are trembling.

SECOND MAN: Very funny. Maybe you didn't have a good job or something? Maybe you don't care. I care. I had a job with a future. Didn't pay much, but a real blue chip future. So they send me to Nowhere.

FIRST MAN: You're not there yet.

SECOND MAN: Yeah, but I'm going.

THIRD MAN: If only they let you know when. My back is killing me. I'm waiting to pull a sick act. Just waiting, that's all.

FIRST MAN: Go ahead and wait, a lot of good it will do you.

THIRD MAN: You mind your own business.

FIRST MAN: I am, doc. You brought the whole thing up.

SECOND MAN: He's looking for trouble.

THIRD MAN: He'll get it.

ALARIC ARKALION: We're going to be together a long time. A long time. Why don't you all relax?

SECOND MAN: You mind your own business.

FIRST MAN: Nuts, aren't they. They're nuts. A sick act, yet.

SECOND MAN: Look how it doesn't bother him. A failure, he was. I can just see it. What does he care if he goes away forever and doesn't come back? One bread line is as good as another.

FIRST MAN: Ha-ha.

SECOND MAN: Yeah, well I mean it. Forever. We're going away, someplace—forever. We're not coming back, ever. No one comes back. It's for good, for keeps.

FIRST MAN: Tell it to your congressman. Or maybe you want to pull a sick act, too?

THIRD MAN: (Hits First Man, who, surprised, crashes back against a table and falls down) It isn't an act, damn you!

GUARD: All right, break it up. Come on, break it up....

ALARIC ARKALION: (To himself) I wish I saw that ten million dollars already—if I ever get to see it.

\* \* \* \* \*

They drove for hours through the fresh country air, feeling the wind against their faces, listening to the roar their ground-jet made, all alone on the rimrock highway.

"Where are we going, Kit?"

"Search me. Just driving."

"I'm glad they let you come out this once. I don't know what they would have done to me if they didn't. I had to see you this once. I—"

Temple smiled. He had absented himself without leave. It had been difficult enough and he might yet be in a lot of hot water, but it would be senseless to worry Stephanie. "It's just for a few hours," he said.

"Hours. When we want a whole lifetime. Kit. Oh, Kit—why don't we run away? Just the two of us, someplace where they'll never find you. I could be packed and ready and—"

"Don't talk like that. We can't."

"You want to go where they're sending you. You want to go."

"For God's sake, how can you talk like that? I don't want to go anyplace, except with you. But we can't run away, Steffy. I've got to face it, whatever it is."

"No you don't. It's noble to be patriotic, sure. It always was. But this is different, Kit. They don't ask for part of your life. Not for two years, or three, or a gamble because maybe you won't ever come back. They ask for all of you, for the rest of your life, forever, and they don't even tell you why. Kit, don't go! We'll hide someplace and get married and—"

"And nothing." Temple stopped the ground-jet, climbed out, opened the door for Stephanie. "Don't you see? There's no place to hide. Wherever you go, they'd look. You wouldn't want to spend the rest of your life running, Steffy. Not with me or anyone else."

"I would. I would!"

"Know what would happen after a few years? We'd hate each other. You'd look at me and say 'I wouldn't be hiding like this, except for you. I'm young and—'"

"Kit, that's cruel! I would not."

"Yes, you would. Steffy, I—" A lump rose in his throat. He'd tell her goodbye, permanently. He had to do it that way, did not want her to wait endlessly and hopelessly for a return that would not materialize. "I didn't get permission to leave, Steffy." He hadn't meant to tell her that, but suddenly it seemed an easy way to break into goodbye.

"What do you mean? No—you didn't...."

"I had to see you. What can they do, send me for longer than forever?"

"Then you do want to run away with me!"

"Steffy, no. When I leave you tonight, Steffy, it's for good. That's it. The last of Kit Temple. Stop thinking about me. I don't exist. I—never was." It sounded ridiculous, even to him.

"Kit, I love you. I love you. How can I forget you?"

"It's happened before. It will happen again." That hurt, too. He was talking about a couple of statistics, not about himself and Stephanie.

"We're different, Kit. I'll love you forever. And—Kit... I know you'll come back to me. I'll wait, Kit. We're different. You'll come back."

"How many people do you think said *that* before?"

"You don't want to come back, even if you could. You're not thinking of us at all. You're thinking of your brother."

"You know that isn't true. Sometimes I wonder about Jase, sure. But if I thought there was a chance to return—I'm a selfish cuss, Steffy. If I thought there was a chance, you know I'd want you all for myself. I'd brand you, and that's the truth."

"You do love me!"

"I loved you, Steffy. Kit Temple loved you."

“Loved?”

“Loved. Past tense. When I leave tonight, it’s as if I don’t exist anymore. As if I never existed. It’s got to be that way, Steffy. In thirty years, no one ever returned.”

“Including your brother, Jase. So now you want to find him. What do I count for? What...”

“This going wasn’t my idea. I wanted to stay with you. I wanted to marry you. I can’t now. None of it. Forget me, Steffy. Forget you ever knew me. Jase said that to our folks before he was taken.” Almost five years before Jason Temple had been selected for the Nowhere Journey. He’d been young, though older than his brother Kit. Young, unattached, almost cheerful he was. Naturally, they never saw him again.

“Hold me, Kit. I’m sorry...carrying on like this.”

They had walked some distance from the ground-jet, through scrub oak and bramble bushes. They found a clearing, fragrant-scented, soft-floored still from last autumn, melodic with the chirping of nameless birds. They sat, not talking. Stephanie wore a gay summer dress, full-skirted, cut deep beneath the throat. She swayed toward him from the waist, nestled her head on his shoulder. He could smell the soft, sweet fragrance of her hair, of the skin at the nape of her neck. “If you want to say goodbye...” she said.

“Stop it,” he told her.

“If you want to say goodbye....”

Her head rolled against his chest. She turned, cradled herself in his arms, smiled up at him, squirmed some more and had her head pillowed on his lap. She smiled tremulously, misty-eyed. Her lips parted.

He bent and kissed her, knowing it was all wrong. This was not goodbye, not the way he wanted it. Quickly, definitely, for once and all. With a tear, perhaps, a lot of tears. But permanent goodbye. This was all wrong. The whole idea was to be business-like, objective. It had to be done that way, or no way at all. Briefly, he regretted leaving the encampment.

This wasn’t goodbye the way he wanted it. The way it had to be. This was *auf weidersen*.

And then he forgot everything but Stephanie....

\* \* \* \* \*

“I am Alaric Arkalion III,” said the extremely young-looking man with the old, wise eyes.

How incongruous, Temple thought. The eyes look almost middle-aged. The rest of him—a boy.

“Something tells me we’ll be seeing a lot of each other,” Arkalion

went on. The voice was that of an older man, too, belying the youthful complexion, the almost childish features, the soft fuzz of a beard.

"I'm Kit Temple," said Temple, extending his hand. "Arkalion, a strange name. I know it from somewhere.... Say! Aren't you—don't you have something to do with carpets or something?"

"Here and now, no. I am a number. A-92-6417. But my father is—perhaps I had better say was—my father is Alaric Arkalion II. Yes, that is right, the carpet king."

"I'll be darned," said Temple.

"Why?"

"Well," Temple laughed. "I never met a billionaire before."

"Here I am not a billionaire, nor will I ever be one again. A-92-6417, a number. On his way to Mars with a bunch of other numbers."

"Mars? You sound sure of yourself."

"Reasonably. Ah, it is a pleasure to talk with a gentleman. I am reasonably certain it will be Mars."

Temple nodded in agreement. "That's what the Sunday supplements say, all right."

"And doubtless you have observed no one denies it."

"But what on Earth do we want on Mars?"

"That in itself is a contradiction," laughed Arkalion. "We'll find out, though, Temple."

They had reached the head of the line, found themselves entering a huge, double-decker jet-transport. They found two seats together, followed the instructions printed at the head of the aisle by strapping themselves in and not smoking. Talking all around them was subdued.

"Contrariness has given way to fear," Arkalion observed. "You should have seen them the last few days, waiting around the induction center, a two-ton chip on each shoulder. Say, where *were* you?"

"I—what do you mean?"

"I didn't see you until last evening. Suddenly, you were here."

"Did anyone else miss me?"

"But I remember you the first day."

"Did anyone else miss me? Any of the officials?"

"No. Not that I know of."

"Then I was here," Temple said, very seriously.

Arkalion smiled. "By George, of course. Then you were here. Temple, we'll get along fine."

Temple said that was swell.

"Anyway, we'd better. Forever is a long time."

Three minutes later, the jet took off and soared on eager wings toward the setting sun.

“Men, since we are leaving here in a few hours and since there is no way to get out of the encampment and no place to go over the desert even if you could,” the microphone in the great, empty hall boomed as the two files of men marched in, “there is no harm in telling you where you are. From this point, in a limited sense, you shall be kept abreast of your progress.

“We are in White Sands, New Mexico.”

“The Garden Spot of the Universe!” someone shouted derisively, remembering the bleak hot desert and jagged mountain peaks as they came down.

“White Sands,” muttered Arkalion. “It looks like space travel now, doesn’t it, Kit.”

Temple shrugged. “Why?”

“White Sands was the center of experiments in rocketry decades ago, when people still talked about those things. Then, for a long time, no one heard anything about White Sands. The rockets grew here, Kit.”

“I can readily see why. You could look all your life without finding a barren spot like this.”

“Precisely. Someone once called this place—or was it some other place like it?—someone once called it a good place to throw old razor blades. If people still used razor blades.”

The microphone blared again, after the several hundred men had entered the great hall and milled about among the echoes. Temple could picture other halls like this, other briefings. “Men, whenever you are given instructions, in here or elsewhere, obey them instantly. Our job is a big one, complicated and exacting. Attention to detail will save us trouble.”

Someone said, “My old man served a hitch in the army, back in the sixties. That’s what he always said, attention to details. The army is crazy about things like that. Are we in the army or something?”

“This is not the army, but the function is similar,” barked the microphone. “Do as you are told and you will get along.”

Stirrings in the crowd. Mutterings. Temple gaped. Microphone, yes—but receivers also, placed strategically, all around the hall, to pick up sound. Telio receivers too, perhaps? It made him feel something like a goldfish.

Apparently someone liked the idea of the two-way microphones. “I got a question. When are we coming back?”

Laughter. Hooting. Catcalls.

Blared the microphone: “There is a rotation system in operation, men. When it is feasible, men will be rotated.”

“Yeah, in thirty years it ain’t been whatsiz—feasible—once!”

“That, unfortunately, is correct. When the situation permits, we will

rotate you home.”

“From where? Where are we going?”

“At least tell us that.”

“Where?”

“How about that?”

There was a pause, then the microphone barked: “I don’t know the answer to that question. You won’t believe me, but it is the truth. No one knows where you are going. No one. Except the people who are already there.”

More catcalls.

“That doesn’t make sense,” Arkalion whispered. “If it’s space travel, the pilots would know, wouldn’t they?”

“Automatic?” Temple suggested.

“I doubt it. Space travel must still be new, even if it has thirty years under its belt. If that man speaks the truth—if no one knows...just where in the universe *are* we going?”

### CHAPTER III

“Hey, looka me. I’m flying!”

“Will you get your big fat feet out of my face?”

“Sure. Show me how to swim away through air, I’ll be glad to.”

“Leggo that spoon!”

“I ain’t got your spoon.”

“Will you look at it float away. Hey spoon, hey!”

“Watch this, Charlie. This will get you. I mean, get you.”

“What are you gonna do?”

“Relax, chum.”

“Leggo my leg. Help! I’m up in the air. Stop that.”

“I said relax. There. Ha-ha, lookit him spin, just like a top. All you got to do is get him started and he spins like a top with arms and legs. Top of the morning to you, Charlie. Ha-ha. I said, top of the....”

“Someone stop me, I’m getting dizzy.”

They floated, tumbled, spun around the spaceship’s lounge room in simple, childish glee. They cavorted in festive weightlessness.

“They’re happy now,” Arkalion observed. “The novelty of free fall, of weighing exactly nothing, strikes them as amusing.”

“I think I’m getting the hang of it,” said Temple. Clumsily, he made a few tentative swimming motions in the air, propelling himself forward a few yards before he lost his balance and tumbled head over heels against the wall.

Arkalion came to him quickly, in a combination of swimming and pushing with hands and feet against the wall. Arkalion righted him expertly, sat down gingerly beside him. “If you keep sudden motions to a minimum, you’ll get along fine. More than anything else, that’s



the secret of it.”

Temple nodded. “It’s sort of like the first time you’re on ice skates. Say, how come you’re so good at it?”

“I used to read the old, theoretical books on space-travel.” The words poured out effortlessly, smoothly. “I’m merely applying the theories put forward as early as the 1950’s.”

“Oh.” But it left Temple with some food for thought. Alaric Arkalion was a queer duck, anyway, and of all the men gathered in the spaceship’s lounge, he alone had mastered weightlessness with hardly any trouble.

“Take your ice skates,” Arkalion went on. “Some people put them on and use them like natural extensions of their feet the first time. Others fall all over themselves. I suppose I am lucky.”

“Sure,” said Temple. Actually, the only thing odd about Arkalion was his old-young face and—perhaps—his propensity for coming up with the right answers at the right times. Arkalion had seemed so certain of space-travel. He’d hardly batted an eyelash when they boarded a long, tapering bullet-shaped ship at White Sands and thundered off into the sky. He took for granted the change-over to a huge round ship at the wheel-shaped station in space. Moments after leaving the space station—with a minimum of stress and strain, thanks to the almost-nil gravity—it was Arkalion who first swam through air to the viewport and pointed out the huge crescent earth, green and gray and brown, sparkling with patches of dazzling silver-white. “You will observe it is a crescent,” Arkalion had said. “It is closer to the sun than we are, and off at an angle. As I suspected, our destination is Mars.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Then everyone was saying goodbye to earth. Fantastic, it seemed. There were tears, there was laughter, cursing, promises of return, awkward verbal comparisons with the crescent moon, vows of faithfulness to lovers and sweethearts. And there was Arkalion, with an avid expression in the old eyes, Arkalion with his boyish face, not saying goodbye so much as he was calling hello to something Temple could not fathom.

Now, as he struggled awkwardly with weightlessness, Temple called it his imagination. His thought-patterns shifted vaguely, without motivation, from the gleaming, polished interior of the ship with its smell of antiseptic and metal polish to the clear Spring air of Earth, blue of sky and bright of sun. The unique blue sky of Earth which he somehow knew could not be duplicated elsewhere. Elsewhere—the word itself bordered on the meaningless.

And Stephanie. The brief warm ecstasy of her—once, forever. He

wondered with surprising objectivity if a hundred other names, a hundred other women were not in a hundred other minds while everyone stared at the crescent Earth hanging serenely in space—with each name and each woman as dear as Stephanie, with the same combination of fire and gentle femininity stirring the blood but saddening the heart. Would Stephanie really forget him? Did he want her to? That part of him burned by the fire of her said no—no, she must not forget him. She was his, his alone, roped and branded though a universe separated them. But someplace in his heart was the thought, the understanding, the realization that although Stephanie might keep a small place for him tucked someplace deep in her emotions, she must forget. He was gone—permanently. For Stephanie, he was dead. It was as he had told her that last stolen day. It was... *Stephanie, Stephanie, how much I love you....*

Struggling with weightlessness, he made his way back to the small room he shared with Arkalion. Hardly more than a cubicle, it was, with sufficient room for two beds, a sink, a small chest. He lay down and slept, murmuring Stephanie's name in his sleep.

\* \* \* \*

He awoke to the faint hum of the air-pumps, got up feeling rested, forgot his weightlessness and floated to the ceiling where only an outthrust arm prevented a nasty bump on his head. He used hand grips on the wall to let himself down. He washed, aware of no way to prevent the water he splashed on his face from forming fine droplets and spraying the entire room. When he crossed back to the foot of his bed to get his towel he thrust one foot out too rapidly, lost his balance, half-rose, stumbled and fell against the other bed which, like all other items of furniture, was fastened to the floor. But his elbow struck sleeping Arkalion's jaw sharply, hard enough to jar the man's teeth.

"I'm sorry," said Temple. "Didn't mean to do that," he apologized again, feeling embarrassed.

Arkalion merely lay there.

"I said I'm sorry."

Arkalion still slept. It seemed inconceivable, for Temple's elbow pained him considerably. He bent down, examined his inert companion.

Arkalion stirred not a muscle.

Vaguely alarmed, Temple thrust a hand to Arkalion's chest, felt nothing. He crouched, rested the side of his head over Arkalion's heart. He listened, heard—nothing.

What was going on here?

"Hey, Arkalion!" Temple shook him, gently at first, then with

savage force. Weightless, Arkalion's body floated up off the bed, taking the covers with it. His own heart pounding furiously, Temple got it down again, fingered the left wrist and swallowed nervously.

Temple had never seen a dead man before. Arkalion's heart did not beat. Arkalion had no pulse.

Arkalion was dead.

Yelling hoarsely, Temple plunged from the room, soaring off the floor in his haste and striking his head against the ceiling hard enough to make him see stars. "This guy is dead!" he cried. "Arkalion is dead."

Men stirred in the companionway. Someone called for one of the armed guards who were constantly on patrol.

"If he's dead, you're yelling loud enough to get him out of his grave." The voice was quiet, amused.

Arkalion.

"What?" Temple blurted, whirling around and striking his head again. A little wild-eyed, he re-entered the room.

"Now, who is dead, Kit?" demanded Arkalion, sitting up and stretching comfortably.

"Who—is dead? Who—?" Open-mouthed, Temple stared.

A guard, completely at home with weightlessness, entered the cubicle briskly. "What's the trouble in here? Something about a dead man, they said."

"A dead man?" demanded Arkalion. "Indeed."

"Dead?" muttered Temple, lamely and foolishly. "Dead...."

Arkalion smiled deprecatingly. "My friend must have been talking in his sleep. The only thing dead in here is my appetite. Weightlessness doesn't let you become very hungry."

"You'll grow used to it," the guard promised. He patted his paunch happily. "I am. Well, don't raise the alarm unless there's some trouble. Remember about the boy who cried wolf."

"Of course," said Temple. "Sure. Sorry."

He watched the guard depart.

"Bad dream?" Arkalion wanted to know.

"Bad dream, my foot. I accidentally hit you. Hard enough to hurt. You didn't move."

"I'm a sound sleeper."

"I felt for your heart. It wasn't beating. It wasn't!"

"Oh, come, come."

"Your heart was not beating, I said."

"And I suppose I was cold as a slab of ice?"

"Umm, no. I don't remember. Maybe you were. You had no pulse, either."

Arkalion laughed easily. "And am I still dead?"

“Well—”

“Clearly a case of overwrought nerves and a highly keyed imagination. What you need is some more sleep.”

“I’m not sleepy, thanks.”

“Well, I think I’ll get up and go down for breakfast.” Arkalion climbed out of bed gingerly, made his way to the sink and was soon gargling with a bottle of prepared mouthwash, occasionally spraying weightless droplets of the pink liquid up at the ceiling.

Temple lit a cigarette with shaking fingers, made his way to Arkalion’s bed while the man hummed tunelessly at the sink. Temple let his hands fall on the sheet. It was not cold, but comfortably cool. Hardly as warm as it should have been, with a man sleeping on it all night.

Was he still imagining things?

“I’m glad you didn’t call for a burial detail and have me expelled into space with yesterday’s garbage,” Arkalion called over his shoulder jauntily as he went outside for some breakfast.

Temple cursed softly and lit another cigarette, dropping the first one into a disposal chute on the wall.

\* \* \* \*

Every night thereafter, Temple made it a point to remain awake after Arkalion apparently had fallen asleep. But if he were seeking repetition of the peculiar occurrence, he was disappointed. Not only did Arkalion sleep soundly and through the night, but he snored. Loudly and clearly, a wheezing snore.

Arkalion’s strange feat—or his own overwrought imagination, Temple thought wryly—was good for one thing: it took his mind off Stephanie. The days wore on in endless, monotonous routine. He took some books from the ship’s library and browsed through them, even managing to find one concerned with traumatic catalepsy, which stated that a severe emotional shock might render one into a deep enough trance to have a layman mistakenly pronounce him dead. But what had been the severe emotional disturbance for Arkalion? Could the effects of weightlessness manifest themselves in that way in rare instances? Temple naturally did not know, but he resolved to find out if he could after reaching their destination.

One day—it was three weeks after they left the space station, Temple realized—they were all called to assembly in the ship’s large main lounge. As the men drifted in, Temple was amazed to see the progress they had made with weightlessness. He himself had advanced to handy facility in locomotion, but it struck him all the more pointedly when he saw two hundred men swim and float through air, pushing themselves along by means of the hand-holds strategically

placed along the walls.

The ever-present microphone greeted them all. "Good afternoon, men."

"Good afternoon, mac!"

"Hey, is this the way to Ebbetts' Field?"

"Get on with it!"

"Sounds like the same man who addressed us in White Sands," Temple told Arkalion. "He sure does get around."

"A recording, probably. Listen."

"Our destination, as you've probably read in newspapers and magazines, is the planet Mars."

Mutterings in the assembly, not many of surprise.

"Their suppositions, based both on the seven hundred eighty day lapse between Nowhere Journeys and the romantic position in which the planet Mars has always been held, are correct. We are going to Mars.

"For most of you, Mars will be a permanent home for many years to come—"

"Most of us?" Temple wondered out loud.

Arkalion raised a finger to his lips for silence.

"—until such time as you are rotated according to the policy of rotation set up by the government."

Temple had grown accustomed to the familiar hoots and catcalls. He almost had an urge to join in himself.

"Interesting," Arkalion pointed out. "Back at White Sands they claimed not to know our destination. They knew it all right—up to a point. The planet Mars. But now they say that all of us will not remain on Mars. Most interesting."

"—further indoctrination in our mission soon after our arrival on the red planet. Landing will be performed under somewhat less strain than the initial takeoff in the Earth-to-station ferry, since Mars exerts less of a gravity pull than Earth. On the other hand, you have been weightless for three weeks and the change-over is liable to make some of you sick. It will pass harmlessly enough.

"We realize it is difficult, being taken from your homes without knowing the nature of your urgent mission. All I can tell you now—and, as a matter of fact, all I know—"

"Here we go again," said Temple. "More riddles."

"—is that everything is of the utmost urgency. Our entire way of life is at stake. Our job will be to safeguard it. In the months which follow, few of you will have any big, significant role to play, but all of you, working together, will provide the strength we need. When the *cadre*—"

"So they call their guards teachers," Arkalion commented dryly.

“—come around, they will see that each man is strapped properly into his bunk for deceleration. Deceleration begins in twenty-seven minutes.”

*Mars*, thought Temple, back in his room with Arkalion. *Mars*. He did not think of Stephanie, except as a man who knows he must spend the rest of his life in prison might think of a lush green field, or the cool swish of skis over fresh, powdery snow, or the sound of yardarms creaking against the wind on a small sailing schooner, or the tang of wieners roasting over an open fire with the crisp air of fall against your back, or the scent of good French brandy, or a woman.

Deceleration began promptly. Before his face was distorted and his eyes forced shut by a pressure of four gravities, Temple had time to see the look of complete unconcern on Arkalion's face. Arkalion, in fact, was sleeping.

He seemed as completely relaxed as he did that morning Temple thought he was dead.

#### CHAPTER IV

“Petrovitch, S. A.!” called the Comrade standing abreast of the head of the line, a thin, nervous man half a head shorter than the girl herself. Sophia Androvna Petrovitch strode forward, took a pair of trim white shorts from the neat stack at his left.

“Is that all?” she said, looking at him.

“Yes, Comrade. Well, a woman. Well.”

Without embarrassment, Sophia had seen the men ahead of her in line strip and climb into the white shorts before they disappeared through a portal ahead of the line, depositing their clothing in a growing pile on the floor. But now it was Sophia's turn, after almost a two hour wait. Not that it was chilly, but....

“Is that all?” she repeated.

“Certainly. Strip and move along, Comrade.” The nervous little man appraised her lecherously, she thought.

“Then I must keep some of my own clothing,” she told him.

“Impossible. I have my orders.”

“I am a woman.”

“You are a volunteer for the Stalintrek. You will take no personal property—no clothing—with you. Strip and advance, please.”

Sophia flushed slightly, while the men behind her began to call and taunt.

“I like this Stalintrek.”

“Oh, yes.”

“We are waiting, Comrade.”

Quickly and with an objective detachment which surprised her, Sophia unbuttoned her shirt, removed it. Her one wish—and an odd

one, she thought, smiling—was for wax for her ears. She loosened the three snaps of her skirt, watched it fall to the floor. She stood there briefly, lithe-limbed, a tall, slim girl, then had the white shorts over her nakedness in one quick motion. She still wore a coarse halter.

"All personal effects, Comrade," said the nervous little man.

"No," Sophia told him.

"But yes. Definitely, yes. You hold up the line, and we have a schedule to maintain. The Stalintrek demands quick, prompt obedience."

"Then you will give me one additional item of clothing."

The man looked at Sophia's halter, at the fine way she filled it. He shrugged. "We don't have it," he said, clearly enjoying himself.

In volunteering for the Stalintrek, Sophia had invaded man's domain. She had watched not with embarrassment but with scorn while the men in front of her got out of their clothing. She had invaded man's domain, and as she watched them, the short flabby ones, the bony ones with protruding ribs and collar-bones, those of milky white skin and soft hands, she knew most of them would bite off more than they could chew if ever they tried what was the most natural thing for men to try with a lone woman in an isolated environment. But she *was* in a man's world now, and if that was the way they wanted it, she would ask no quarter.

She reached up quickly with one hand and unfastened the halter, catching it with her free hand and holding it in front of her breasts while the nervous little man licked his lips and gaped. Sophia grabbed another pair of the white shorts, tore it quickly with her strong fingers, fashioning a crude covering for herself. This she pulled around her, fastening it securely with a knot in back.

"You'll have to give that back to me," declared the nervous little Comrade.

"I'll bet you a samovar on that," Sophia said quietly, so only the man heard her.

He reached out, as if to rip the crude halter from her body, but Sophia met him halfway with her strong, slim fingers, wrapping them around his biceps and squeezing. The man's face turned quickly to white as he tried unsuccessfully to free his arm.

"Please, that hurts."

"I keep what I am wearing." She tightened her grip, but gazed serenely into space as the man stifled a whimper.

"Well—" the man whispered indecisively as he gritted his teeth.

"Fool!" said Sophia. "Your arm will be black and blue for a week. While you men grow soft and lazy, many of the women take their gymnastics seriously, especially if they want to keep their figures with the work they must do and the food they must eat. I am stronger than

you and I will hurt you unless—" And her hand tightened around his scrawny arm until her knuckles showed white.

"Wear what you have and go," the man pleaded, and moaned softly when Sophia released his numb arm and strode through the portal, still drawing whistles and leers from the other men, who missed the by-play completely.

\* \* \* \*

"So we're on Mars!"

"It ain't Nowhere after all, it's Mars."

"Wait and see, buster. Wait and see."

"Kind of cold, isn't it? Well, if this was Venus and some of them beautiful one-armed dames was waiting for us—"

"That's just a statue, stupid."

"Lookit all them people down there, will you?"

"You think they're Martians?"

"Stupid! We ain't the first ones went on the Nowhere Journey."

"What are we waiting for? It sure will feel good to stretch your legs."

"Let's go!"

"Look out, Mars, here I come!"

It would have been just right for a Hollywood epic, Temple thought. The rusty ochre emptiness spreading out toward the horizon in all directions, spotted occasionally with pale green and frosty white, the sky gray with but a shade of blue in it, distant gusts of Martian wind swirling ochre clouds across the desert, the spaceship poised on its ungainly bottom, a great silver bowling ball with rocket tubes for finger holes, and the Martians from Earth who had been here on this alien world for seven-hundred-eighty days or twice seven-eighty or three times, and who fought in frenzied eagerness, like savages, to reach the descending gangplank first.

Earth chorus: Hey, Martians, any of you guys speak English? Haha, I said, any of you guys....

Where are all them canals I heard so much about?

You think maybe they're dangerous? (Laughter)

No dames. Hey, no dames....

Who were you expecting, Donna Daunley?

What kind of place is Mars with no women?

What do they do here, anyway, just sit around and wait for the next rocket?

I'm cold.

Get used to it, brother, get used to it.

Look out, Mars, here I come!

Martian chorus: Who won the Series last year, Detroit?



Hey, bud, tell me, are dames still wearing those one piece things, all colors, so you see their legs up to about here and their chests down to about here? (Gestures lewdly)

Which one of you guys can tell me what it's like to take a bath? I mean a real bath in a real bath tub.

Hey, we licked Russia yet?

We heard they were gonna send some dames!

Dames—ha-ha, you're breaking my heart.

Tell me what a steak tastes like. So thick.

Me? Gimme a bowl of steamed oysters. And a dame.

Dames. Girls. Women. Females. Chicks. Tomatoes. Frails. Dames. Dames. Dames....

They did not seem to mind the cold, these Earth-Martians. Temple guessed they never spent much time out of doors (above ground, for there were no buildings?) because all seemed pale and white. While the sun was weaker, so was the protection offered by a thinner atmosphere. The sun's actinic rays could burn, and so could the sand-driving wind. But pale skins could not be the result of staying indoors, for Temple noted the lack of man-made structures at once. Underground, then. The Earth-Martians lived underground like moles. Doing what? And for what reason? With what ultimate goal, if any? And where did those men who did not remain on Mars go? Temple's head whirled with countless questions—and no answers.

Shoulder to shoulder with Arkalion, he made his way down the gangplank, turning up the collar of his jumper against the stinging wind.

"You got any newspapers, pal?"

"Magazines?"

"Phonograph records?"

"Gossip?"

"Newsfilm?"

"Who's the heavyweight champ?"

"We lick those Commies in Burma yet?"

"Step back! Watch that man. Maybe he's your replacement."

"Replacement. Ha-ha. That's good."

All types of men. All ages. In torn, tattered clothing, mostly. In rags. Even if a man seemed more well-groomed than the rest, on closer examination Temple could see the careful stitching, the patches, the fades and stains. No one seemed to mind.

"Hey, bud. What do you hear about rotation? They passed any laws yet?"

"I been here ten years. When do *I* get rotated?"

"Ain't that something? Dad Jenks came here with the first ship. Don't you talk about rotation. Ask Dad."

“Better not mention that word to Dad Jenks. He sees red.”

“This whole damn planet is red.”

“Want a guided tour of Nowhere, men? Step right up.”

Arkalion grinned. “They seem so well-adjusted,” he said, then shuddered against the cold and followed Temple, with the others, through the crowd.

They were inoculated against nameless diseases. (Watch for the needle with the hook)

They were told again they had arrived on the planet Mars. (No kidding?)

Led to a drab underground city, dimly lit, dank, noisome with mold and mildew. (Quick, the chlorophyll)

Assigned bunks in a dormitory, with four men to a room. (Be it ever so humble—bah!)

Told to keep things clean and assigned temporarily to a garbage pickup detail. (For this I left Sheboygan?)

Read to from the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and Public Law 1182 (concerned with the Nowhere Journey, it told them nothing they did not already know).

Given as complete a battery of tests, mental, emotional and physical, as Temple ever knew existed. (Cripes, man! How the hell should I know what the cube root of -5 is? I never finished high school!)

Subjected to an exhaustive, overlong, and at times meaningless personal interview. (No doc, honest. I never knew I had a—uh—anxiety neurosis. Is it dangerous?)

“How do you do, Temple? Sit down.”

“Thank you.”

“Thought you’d like to know that while your overall test score is not uncanny, it’s decidedly high.”

“So what?”

“So nothing—not necessarily. Except that with it you have a very well balanced personality. We can use you, Temple.”

“That’s why I’m here.”

“I mean—elsewhere. Mars is only a way station, a training center for a select few. It takes an awful lot of administrative work to keep this place going, which explains the need for all the station personnel.”

“Listen. The last few weeks I had everything thrown at me. Everything, the works. Mind answering one question?”

“Shoot.”

“What’s this all about?”

“Temple, I don’t know!”

“You what?”

"I know you find it hard to believe, but I don't. There isn't a man here on Mars who knows the whole story, either—and certainly not on Earth. We know enough to keep everything in operation. And we know it's important, all of it, everything we do."

"You mentioned a need for some men elsewhere. Where?"

The psychiatrist shrugged. "I don't know. Somewhere. Anywhere." He spread his hands out eloquently. "That's where the Nowhere Journey comes in."

"Surely you can tell me something more than—"

"Absolutely not. It isn't that I don't want to. I can't. I don't know."

"Well, one more question I'd like you to answer."

The psychiatrist lit a cigarette, grinned. "Say, who is interviewing whom?"

"This one I think you can tackle. I have a brother, Jason Temple. Embarked on the Nowhere Journey five years ago. I wonder—"

"So that's the one factor in your psychograph we couldn't figure out—anxiety over your brother."

"I doubt it," shrugged Temple. "More likely my fiancée."

"Umm, common enough. You were to be married?"

"Yes." *Stephanie, what are you doing now? Right now?*

"That's what hurts the most.... Well, yes, I can find out about your brother." The psychiatrist flicked a toggle on his desk. "Jamison, find what you can on Temple, Jason, year of—"

"1987," Temple supplied.

"1987. We'll wait."

After a moment or two, the voice came through, faintly metallic: "Temple, Jason. Arrival: 1987. Psychograph, 115-bl2. Mental aggregate, 98. Physcom, good to excellent. Training: two years, space perception concentrate, others. Shipped out: 1989."

So Jase had shipped out for—Nowhere.

"Someday you'll follow in your brother's footsteps, Temple. Now, though, I have a few hundred questions I'd like you to answer."

The psychiatrist hadn't exaggerated. Several hours of questioning followed. Once reminded of her, Temple found it hard to keep his thought off Stephanie.

He left the psychiatrist's office more confused than ever.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Good morning, child. You are Stephanie Andrews?" Stephanie hadn't felt up to working that first morning after Kit's final goodbye. She answered the door in her bathrobe, saw a small, middle-aged woman with graying hair and a kind face. "That's right. Won't you come in?"

"Thank you. I represent the Complete Emancipation League, Miss

Andrews.”

“Complete Emancipation League? Oh, something to do with politics. Really, I’m not much interested in—”

“That’s entirely the trouble,” declared the older woman. “Too many of us are not interested in politics. I’d like to discuss the C.E.L. with you, my dear, if you will bear with me a few minutes.”

“All right,” said Stephanie. “Would you like a glass of sherry?”

“In the morning?” the older woman smiled.

“I’m sorry. Don’t mind me. My fiance left yesterday, took his final goodbye. He—he embarked on the Nowhere Journey.”

“I realize that. It is precisely why I am here. My dear, the C.E.L. does not want to fight the government. If the government decides that the Nowhere Journey is vital for the welfare of the country—even if the government won’t or can’t explain what the Nowhere Journey is—that’s all right with us. But if the government says there is a rotation system but does absolutely nothing about it, we’re interested in that. Do you follow me?”

“Yes!” cried Stephanie. “Oh, yes. Go on.”

“The C.E.L. has sixty-eight people in Congress for the current term. We hope to raise that number to seventy-five for next election. It’s a long fight, a slow uphill fight, and frankly, my dear, we need all the help we can get. People—young women like yourself, my dear—are entirely too lethargic, if you’ll forgive me.”

“You ought to forgive *me*,” said Stephanie, “if you will. You know, it’s funny. I had vague ideas about helping Kit, about finding some way to get him back. Only to tackle something like that alone.... I’m only twenty-one, just a girl, and I don’t know anyone important. No one ever comes back, that’s what you hear. But there’s a rotation system, you also hear that. If I can be of any help....”

“You certainly can, my dear. We’d be delighted to have you.”

“Then, eventually, maybe, just maybe, we’ll start getting them rotated home?”

“We can’t promise a thing. We can only try. And I never did say we’d try to get the boys rotated, my dear. There is a rotation system in the law, right there in Public Law 1182. But if no men have ever been rotated, there must be a reason for it.”

“Yes, but—”

“But we’ll see. If for some reason rotation simply is not practicable, we’ll find another way. Which is why we call ourselves the C.E.L.—Complete Emancipation League—for women. If men must embark on the Nowhere Journey—the least they can do is let their women volunteer to go along with them if they want to—since it may be forever. Let a bunch of women get to this Nowhere place and you’ll never know what might happen, that’s what I say.”

Something about the gray haired woman's earthly confidence imbued Stephanie with an optimism she never expected. "Well," she said, smiling, "if we can't bring ourselves to Mohammed.... No, that's all wrong!...to the mountain...?"

"Yes, there's an old saying. But it isn't important. You get the idea. My dear, how would you like to go to Nowhere?"

"I—to Kit, anywhere, anywhere!" *I'll never forget yesterday, Kit darling. Never!*

"I make no promises, Stephanie, but it may be sooner than you think. Morning be hanged, perhaps I will have some sherry after all. Umm, you wouldn't by any chance have some Canadian instead?"

Humming, Stephanie dashed into the kitchen for some glasses.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were times when the real Alaric Arkalion III wished his father would mind his own business. Like that thing about the Nowhere Journey, for instance. Maybe Alaric Sr. didn't realize it, but being the spoiled son of a billionaire wasn't all fun. "I'm a dilettante," Alaric would tell himself often, gazing in the mirror, "a bored dilettante at the age of twenty-one."

Which in itself, he had to admit, wasn't too bad. But having reneged on the Nowhere Journey in favor of a stranger twice his age who now carried his, Alaric's face, had engendered some annoying complications. "You'll either have to hide or change your own appearance and identity, Alaric."

"Hide? For how long, father?"

"I can't be sure. Years, probably."

"That's crazy. I'm not going to hide for years."

"Then change your appearance. Your way of life. Your occupation."

"I have no occupation."

"Get one. Change your face, too. Your fingerprints. It can be done. Become a new man, live a new life."

In hiding there was boredom, impossible boredom. In the other alternative there was adventure, intrigue—but uncertainty. One part of young Alaric craved that uncertainty, the rest of him shunned it. In a way it was like the Nowhere Journey all over again.

"Maybe Nowhere wouldn't have been so bad," said Alaric to his father, choosing as a temporary alternative and retreat what he knew couldn't possibly happen.

Couldn't it?

"If I choose another identity, I'd be eligible again for the Nowhere Journey."

"By George, I hadn't considered that. No, wait. You could be older than twenty-six."

“I like it the way I am,” Alaric said, pouting.

“Then you’ll have to hide. I spent ten million dollars to secure your future, Alaric. I don’t want you to throw it away.”

Alaric pouted some more. “Let me think about it.”

“Fair enough, but I’ll want your answer tomorrow. Meanwhile, you are not to leave the house.”

Alaric agreed verbally, but took the first opportunity which presented itself—that very night—to sneak out the servants’ door, go downtown, and get stewed to the gills.

At two in the morning he was picked up by the police for disorderly conduct (it had happened before) after losing a fistfight to a much poorer, much meaner drunk in a downtown bar. They questioned Alaric at the police station, examined his belongings, went through his wallet, notified his home.

Fuming, Alaric Sr. rushed to the police station to get his son. He was met by the desk sergeant, a fat, balding man who wore his uniform in a slovenly fashion.

“Mr. Arkalion?” demanded the sergeant, picking at his teeth with a toothpick.

“Yes. I have come for Alaric, my son.”

“Sure. Sure. But your son’s in trouble, Mr. Arkalion. Serious trouble.”

“What are you talking about? If there are any damages, I’ll pay. He didn’t—hurt, anyone, did he?”

The sergeant broke the toothpick between his teeth, laughed. “Him? Naw. He got the hell beat out of him by a drunk half his size. It ain’t that kind of trouble, Mr. Arkalion. You know what an 1182 card is, mister?”

Arkalion’s face drained white. “Why—yes.”

“Alaric’s got one.”

“Naturally.”

“According to the card, he should have shipped out on the Nowhere Journey, mister. He didn’t. He’s in serious trouble.”

“I’ll see the district attorney.”

“More’n likely, you’ll see the attorney general. Serious trouble.”

## CHAPTER V

The trouble with the Stalintrek, Sophia thought, was that it took months to get absolutely nowhere. There had been the painful pressure, the loss of consciousness, the confinement in this tight little world of dormitories and gleaming metal walls, the uncanny feeling of no weight, the ability—boring after a while, but interesting at first—to float about in air almost at will.

Then, how many months of sameness? Sophia had lost all track of

time through *ennui*. But for the first brief period of adjustment on the part of her fellows to the fact that although she was a woman and shared their man's life she was still to be inviolate, the routine had been anything but exciting. The period of adjustment had had its adventures, its uncertainties, its challenge, and to Sophia it had been stimulating. Why was it, she wondered, that the men who carried their sex with strength and dignity, the hard-muscled men who could have their way with her if they resorted to force were the men who did not violate her privacy, while the weaklings, the softer, smaller men, or the average men whom Sophia considered her physical equals were the ones who gave her trouble?

She had always accepted her beauty, the obvious attraction men found in her, with an objective unconcern. She had been endowed with sex appeal; there was not much room in her life to exploit it, even had she wanted to. Now, now when she wanted anything but that, it gave her trouble.

Her room was shared, of necessity, with three men. Tall, gangling Boris gave her no trouble, turned his back when she undressed for the evening, even though she was careful to slip under the covers first. Ivan, the second man, was short, thin, stooped. Often she found him looking at her with what might have been more than a healthy interest, but aside from that he kept his peace. Besides, Ivan had spent two years in secondary school (as much as Sophia) and she enjoyed conversing with him.

The third man, Georgi, was the troublemaker. Georgi was one of those plump young men with red cheeks, big, eager eyes, a voice somewhat too high. He was an avid talker, a boaster and a bore. In the beginning he showered attentions on Sophia. He insisted on drawing her wash-basin at night, escorted her to breakfast every morning, told her in confidence of the conquests he had made over beautiful women (but not as beautiful as you, Sophia). He soon began to take liberties. He would sit—timorously at first, but with growing boldness—on the corner of her bed, talking with her at night after the others had retired, Ivan with his snores, Boris with his strong, deep breathing. And night after night, plump Georgi grew bolder.

He would reach out and touch Sophia, he would insist on tucking her in at night (let me be your big brother), he would awaken her in the morning with his hand heavy on her shoulder. Finally, one night at bedtime, she heard him conversing in low whispers with Ivan and Boris. She could not hear the words, but Boris looked at her with what she thought was surprise, Ivan nodded in an understanding way, and both of them left the room.

Sophia frowned. "What did you tell them, Georgi?"

"That we wanted to be alone one evening, of course."

"I never gave you any indication—"

"I could see it in your eyes, in the way you looked at me."

"Well, you had better call them back inside and go to bed."

Georgi shook his head, approached her.

"Georgi! Call them back or I will."

"No, you won't." Georgi followed her as she retreated into a corner of the room. When she reached the wall and could retreat no further, he placed his thick hands on her shoulders, drew her to him slowly. "You will call no one," he rasped.

She ducked under his arms, eluded him, was on the point of running to the door, throwing it open and shouting, when she considered. If she did, she would be asking for quarter, gaining a temporary reprieve, inviting the same sort of thing all over again.

She crossed to the bed and sat down. "Come here, Georgi."

"Ah." He came to her.

She watched him warily, a soft flabby man not quite so tall as she was, but who nevertheless outweighed her by thirty or forty pounds. In his eagerness, he walked too fast, lost his footing and floated gently to the ceiling. Smiling as demurely as she could, Sophia reached up, circled his ankle with her hand.

"I never could get used to this weightlessness," Georgi admitted. "Be nice and pull me down."

"I will be nice. I will teach you a lesson."

He weighed exactly nothing. It was as simple as stretching. Sophia merely extended her arm upwards and Georgi's head hit the ceiling with a loud *thunk*. Georgi groaned. Sophia repeated the procedure, lowering her arm a foot—and Georgi with it—then raising it and bouncing his head off the ceiling.

"I don't understand," Georgi whined, trying to break free but only succeeding in thrashing his chubby arms foolishly.

"You haven't mastered weightlessness," Sophia smiled up at him. "I have. I said I would teach you a lesson. First make sure you have the strength of a man if you would play a man's game."

Still smiling, Sophia commenced spinning the hand which held Georgi's ankle. Arms and free leg flailing air helplessly, Georgi began to spin.

"Put me down!" he whined, a boy now, not even pretending to be a man. When Sophia shoved out gently and let his ankle go he did a neat flip in air and hung suspended, upside down, his feet near the ceiling, his head on a level with Sophia's shoulders. He cried.

She slapped his upside down face, carefully and without excitement, reddening the cheeks. "I was—only joking," he slobbered. "Call back our friends."

Sophia found one of the hard, air-tight metal flasks they used for



drinking in weightlessness. With one hand she opened the lid, with the other she grasped Georgi's shoulder and spun him in air, still upside down. She squirted the water in his face, and because he was upside down and yelling it made him choke and cough. When the container was empty she lowered Georgi gently to the floor.

Minutes later, she opened the door, summoned Boris and Ivan, who came into the room self-consciously. What they found was a thoroughly beaten Georgi sobbing on the floor. After that, Sophia had no trouble. Week after week of boredom followed and she almost wished Georgi or someone else would *look* for trouble...even if it were something she could not handle, for although she was stronger than average and more beautiful, she was still a woman first, and she knew if the right man....

\* \* \* \*

"Did you know that radio communication is maintained between Earth and Mars?" the Alaric Arkalion on Mars asked Temple.

"Why, no. I never thought about it."

"It is, and I am in some difficulty."

"What's the matter?" Temple had grown to like Arkalion, despite the man's peculiarities. He had given up trying to figure him out, feeling that the only way he'd get anywhere was with Arkalion's cooperation.

"It's a long story which I'm afraid you would not altogether understand. The authorities on Earth don't think I belong here on the Nowhere Journey."

"Is that so? A mistake, huh? I sure am glad for you, Alaric."

"That's not the difficulty. It seems that there is the matter of impersonation, of violating some of the clauses in Public Law 1182. You're glad for me. I'm likely to go to prison."

"If it's that serious, how come they told you?"

"They didn't. But I—managed to find out. I won't go into details, Kit, but obviously, if I managed to embark for Nowhere when I didn't have to, then I wanted to go. Right?"

"I—uh, guess so. But why—?"

"That isn't the point. I *still* want to go. Not to Mars, but to Nowhere. I still can, despite what has happened, but I need help."

Temple said, "Anything I can do, I'll be glad to," and meant it. For one thing, he liked Arkalion. For another, Arkalion seemed to know more, much more than he would ever say—unless Temple could win his confidence. For a third, Temple was growing sick and tired of Mars with its drab ochre sameness (when he got to the surface, which was rarely), with its dank underground city, with its meaningless attention to meaningless detail. Either way, he figured there was no returning to

Earth. If Nowhere meant adventure, as he suspected it might, it would be preferable. Mars might have been the other end of the galaxy for all its nearness to Earth, anyway.

"There is a great deal you can do. But you'll have to come with me."

"Where?" Temple demanded.

"Where you will go eventually. To Nowhere."

"Fine." And Temple smiled. "Why not now as well as later?"

"I'll be frank with you. If you go now, you go untrained. You may need your training. Undoubtedly, you will."

"You know a lot more than you want to talk about, don't you?"

"Frankly, yes.... I am sorry, Kit."

"That's all right. You have your reasons. I guess if I go with you I'll find out soon enough, anyway."

Arkalion grinned. "You have guessed correctly. I am going to Nowhere, before they return me to Earth for prosecution under Public Law 1182. I cannot go alone, for it takes at least two to operate...well, you'll see."

"Count me in," said Temple.

"Remember, you may one day wish you had remained on Mars for your training."

"I'll take my chances. Mars is driving me crazy. All I do is think of Earth and Stephanie."

"Then come."

"Where are we going?"

"A long, long way off. It is unthinkable remote, this place called Nowhere."

Temple felt suddenly like a kid playing hookey from school. "Lead on," he said, almost jauntily. He knew he was leaving Stephanie still further behind, but had he been in prison on the next street to hers, he might as well have been a million miles away.

As for Arkalion—the thought suddenly struck Temple—Arkalion wasn't necessarily leaving his world further behind. Perhaps Arkalion was going home....

\* \* \* \*

Stephanie picked up the phone eagerly. In the weeks since her first meeting with Mrs. Draper of the C.E.L., the older woman had been a fountain of information and of hope for her. Stephanie for her part had taken over Mrs. Draper's job in her own section of Center City: she was busy contacting the two hundred mothers and fifty sweethearts of the Nowhere Journey which had taken Kit from her. And now Mrs. Draper had called with information.

"We've successfully combined forces with some of the less militant

elements in both houses of Congress,” Mrs. Draper told her over the phone. “Do you realize, my dear, this marks the first time the C.E.L. has managed to put something constructive through Congress? Until now we’ve been content merely to block legislation, such as an increase in the Nowhere contingent from....”

“Yes, Mrs. Draper. I know all that. But what about this constructive thing you’ve done.”

“Well, my dear, don’t count your chickens. But we *have* passed the bill, and we expect the President won’t veto it. You see, the President has two nephews who....”

“I know. I know. What bill did you pass?”

“Unfortunately, it’s somewhat vague. Ultimately, the Nowhere Commission must do the deciding, but it does pave the way.”

“For what, Mrs. Draper?”

“Hold onto your hat, my dear. The bill authorizes the Nowhere Commission to make as much of a study as it can of conditions—wherever our boys are sent.”

“Oh.” Stephanie was disappointed. “That won’t get them back to us.”

“No. You’re right, it won’t get them back to us. That isn’t the idea at all, for there is more than one way to skin a cat, my dear. The Nowhere Commission will be studying conditions—”

“How can they? I thought everything was so hush-hush, not even Congress knew anything about it.”

“That was the first big hurdle we have apparently overcome. Anyway, they will be studying conditions with a view of determining if one girl—just one, mind you—can embark on the Nowhere Journey as a pilot study and—”

“But I thought they could make the journey only once every seven-hundred-eighty days.”

“Get Congress aroused and you can move mountains. It seems the expense entailed in a trip at any but those times is generally prohibitive, but when something special comes up—”

“It can be done! Mrs. Draper, how I love to talk with you!”

“See? There you go, my dear, counting your chickens. One girl will be sent, if the study indicates she can take it. One girl, Stephanie, and only after a study. She’d merely be a pilot case. But afterwards.... Ah, afterwards.... Perhaps someday soon qualified women will be able to join their men in Nowhere.”

“Mrs. Draper, I love you.”

“Naturally, you will tell all this to prospective C.E.L. members. Now we have something concrete to work with.”

“I know. And I will, I will, Mrs. Draper. By the way, how are they going to pick the girl, the one girl?”

“Don’t count your chickens, for Heaven’s sake! They haven’t even studied the situation yet. Well, I’ll call you, my dear.”

Stephanie hung up, dressed, went about her canvassing. She thought happy thoughts all week.

\* \* \* \*

“Shh! Quiet,” cautioned Arkalion, leading the way down a flight of heavy-duty plastic stairs.

“How do you know your way around here so well?”

“I said quiet.”

It was not so much, Temple realized, that Arkalion was really afraid of making noise. Rather, he did not want to answer questions.

Temple smiled in the semi-darkness, heard the steady drip-drip-drip of water off somewhere to his left. Eons before the coming of man on this stopover point to Nowhere, the Martian waters had retreated from the planet’s ancient surface and seeped underground to carve, slow drop by drop, the caverns which honey-combed the planet. “You know your way around so well, I’d swear you were a Martian.”

Arkalion’s soft laugh carried far. “I said there was to be no noise. Please! As for the Martians, the only Martians are here all around you, the men of Earth. Ahh, here we are.”

At the bottom of the flight of stairs Temple could see a door, metallic, giving the impression of strength without great weight. Arkalion paused a moment, did something with a series of levers, shook his head impatiently, started all over again.

“What’s that for?” Temple wanted to know.

“What do you think? It is a combination lock, with five million possible combinations. Do you want to be here for all of eternity?”

“No.”

“Then quiet.”

Vaguely, Temple wondered why the door wasn’t guarded.

“With a lock like this,” Arkalion explained, as if he had read Temple’s thought, “they need no other precaution. It is assumed that only authorized personnel know the combination.”

Then had Arkalion come this way before? It seemed the only possible assumption. But when? And how? “Here we are,” said Arkalion.

The door swung in toward them.

Temple strode forward, found himself in a great bare hall, surprisingly well-lighted. After the dimness of the caverns, he hardly could see.

“Don’t stand there scowling and fussing with your eyes. There is one additional precaution—an alarm at Central Headquarters. We have about five minutes, no more.”

At one end of the bare hall stood what to Temple looked for all the world like an old-fashioned telephone booth, except that its walls were completely opaque. On the wall adjacent to it was a single lever with two positions marked “hold” and “transport”. The lever stood firmly in the “hold” position.

“You sure you want to come?” Arkalion demanded.

“Yes, I told you that.”

“Good. I have no time to explain. I will enter the conveyor.”

“Conveyor?”

“This booth. You will wait until the door is shut, then pull the lever down. That is all there is to it, but, as you can see, it is a two-man operation.”

“But how do I—”

“Haste, haste! There are similar controls at the other end. You pull the lever, wait two minutes, enter the conveyor yourself. I will fetch you—if you are sure.”

“I’m sure, dammit!”

“Remember, you go without training, without the opportunity everyone else has.”

“You already told me that. Mars is halfway to eternity. Mars is limbo. If I can’t go back to Earth I want to go—well, to Nowhere. There are too many ghosts here, too many memories with nothing to do.”

Arkalion shrugged, entered the booth. “Pull the lever,” he said, and shut the door.

Temple reached up, grasped the lever firmly in his hand, yanked it. It slid smoothly to the position marked “transport.” Temple heard nothing, saw nothing, began to think the device, whatever it was, did not work. Did Arkalion somehow get *moved* inside the booth?

Temple thought he heard footfalls on the stairs outside. Soon, faintly, he could hear voices. Someone banged on the door to the hall. Licking dry lips, Temple opened the booth, peered inside.

Empty.

The voices clamored, fists pounded on the door. Something clicked. Tumblers fell. The door to the great, bright hall sprung outward. Someone rushed in at Temple, who met him savagely with a short, chopping blow to his jaw. The man, temporarily blinded by the dazzling light, stumbled back in the path of his fellows.

Temple darted into the booth, the conveyor, and slammed it shut. Fingers clawed on the outside.

A sound almost too intense to be heard rang in Temple’s ears. He lost consciousness instantly.

"What a cockeyed world," said Alaric Arkalion Sr. to his son. "You certainly can't plan on anything, even if you do have more money than you'll ever possibly need in a lifetime."

"Don't feel like that," said young Alaric. "I'm not in prison any longer, am I?"

"No. But you're not free of the Nowhere Journey, either. There is an unheralded special trip to Nowhere, two weeks from today, I have been informed."

"Oh?"

"Yes, oh. I have also been informed that you will be on it. You didn't escape after all, Alaric."

"Oh. Oh!"

"What bothers me most is that scoundrel Smith somehow managed to escape. They haven't found him yet, I have also been informed. And since my contract with him calls for ten million dollars 'for services rendered,' I'll have to pay."

"But he didn't prevent me from—"

"I can't air this thing, Alaric! But listen, son: when you go where you are going, you're liable to find another Alaric Arkalion, your double. Of course, that would be Smith. If you can get him to cut his price in half because of what has happened, I would be delighted. If you could somehow manage to wring his neck, I would be even more delighted. Ten million dollars—for nothing."

"I'm so excited," murmured Mrs. Draper. Stephanie watched her on one of the new televiewers, recently installed in place of the telephone.

"What is it?"

"Our bill has been passed by a landslide majority in both houses of Congress!"

"Ooo!" cried Stephanie.

"Not very coherent, my dear, but those are my sentiments exactly. In two weeks there will be a Journey to Nowhere, a special one which will include, among its passengers, a woman."

"But the study which had to be made—?"

"It's already been made. From what I gather, they can't take it very far. Most of their conclusions had to be based on supposition. The important thing, though, is this: a woman *will* be sent. The way the C.E.L. figures it, my dear, is that a woman falling in the twenty-one to twenty-six age group should be chosen, a woman who meets all the requirements placed upon the young men."

"Yes," said Stephanie. "Of course. And I was just thinking that I would be—"

"Remember those chickens!" cautioned Mrs. Draper. "We already have one hundred seventy-seven volunteers who'd claw each other to

pieces for a chance to go.”

“Wrong,” Stephanie said, smiling. “You now have one hundred seventy-eight.”

“Room for only one, my dear. Only one, you know.”

“Then cross the others off your list. I’m already packing my bag.”

\* \* \* \*

When Temple regained consciousness, it was with the feeling that no more than a split second of time had elapsed. So much had happened so rapidly that, until now, he hadn’t had time to consider it.

Arkalion had vanished.

Vanished—he could use no other word. He was there, standing in the booth—and then he wasn’t. Simple as that. Now you see it, now you don’t. And goodbye, Arkalion.

But goodbye Temple, too. For hadn’t Temple entered the same booth, waiting but a second until Arkalion activated the mechanism at the other end? And certainly Temple wasn’t in the booth now. He smiled at the ridiculously simple logic of his thoughts. He stood in an open field, the blades of grass rising to his knees, as much brilliant purple as they were green. Waves of the grass, stirred like tide by the gentle wind, and hills rolling off toward the horizon in whichever direction he turned. Far away, the undulating hills lifted to a half soft mauve sky. A somber red sun with twice Sol’s apparent disc but half its brightness hung mid-way between zenith and horizon completing the picture of peaceful other-worldliness.

Wherever this was, it wasn’t Earth—or Mars.

Nowhere?

Temple shrugged, started walking. He chose his direction at random, crushing an easily discernible path behind him in the surprisingly brittle grass. The warm sun baked his back comfortably, the soft-stirring wind caressed his cheeks. Of Arkalion he found not a trace.

Two hours later Temple reached the hills and started climbing their gentle slopes. It was then that he saw the figure approaching on the run. It took him fully half a minute to realize that the runner was not human.

\* \* \* \*

After months of weightless inactivity, things started to happen for Sophia. The feeling of weight returned, but weight as she never had felt it before. It was as if someone was sitting on every inch of her body, crushing her down. It made her gasp, forced her eyes shut and, although she could not see it, contorted her face horribly. She lost consciousness, coming to some time later with a dreadful feeling of

loginess. Someone swam into her vision dimly, stung her arm briefly with a needle. She slept.

She was on a table, stretched out, with lights glaring down at her. She heard voices.

“The new system is far better than testing, comrade.”

“Far more efficient, far more objective. Yes.”

“The brain emits electromagnetic vibration. Strange, is it not, that no one before ever imagined it could tell a story. A completely accurate story two years of testing could not give us.”

“In Russia we have gone far with the biological, psychological sciences. The West flies high with physics. Give them Mars; bah, they can have Mars.”

“True, Comrade. The journey to Jupiter is greater, the time consumed is longer, the cost, more expensive. But here on Jupiter we can do something they cannot do on Mars.”

“I know.”

“We can make supermen. Supermen, comrade. A wedding of Nietzsche and Marx.”

“Careful. Those are dangerous thoughts.”

“Merely an allusion, comrade. Merely a harmless allusion. But you take an ordinary human being and train him on Jupiter, speeding his time-sense and metabolic rate tremendously with certain endocrine secretions so that one day is as a month to him. You take him and subject him to big Jupiter’s pull of gravity, more than twice Earth’s—and in three weeks you have, yes—you have a superman.”

“The woman wakes.”

“Shh. Do not frighten her.”

Sophia stretched, every muscle in her body aching. Slowly, as in a dream, she sat up. It required strength, the mere act of pulling her torso upright!

“What have you done to me?” she cried, focusing her still-dim vision on the two men.

“Nothing, comrade. Relax.”

Sophia turned slowly on the table, got one long shapely leg draped over its edge.

“Careful, comrade.”

What were they warning her about? She merely wanted to get up and stretch; perhaps then she would feel better. Her toe touched the floor, she swung her other leg over, aware of but ignoring her nakedness.

“A good specimen.”

“Oh, yes, comrade. So this time they send a woman among the others. Well, we shall do our work. Look—see the way she is formed, so lithe, loose-limbed, agile. See the toning of the muscles? Her beauty



will remain, comrade, but Jupiter shall make an amazon of her.”

Sophia had both feet on the floor now. She was breathing hard, felt suddenly sick to her stomach. Placing both her hands on the table edge, she pushed off and staggered for two or three paces. She crumpled, buckling first at the knees then the waist and fell in a writhing heap.

“Pick her up.”

Hands under her arms, tugging. She came off the floor easily, dimly aware that someone carried her hundred and thirty pounds effortlessly. “Put me down!” she cried. “I want to try again. I am crippled, crippled! You have crippled me....”

“Nothing of the sort, comrade. You are tired, weak, and Jupiter’s gravity field is still too strong for you. Little by little, though, your muscles will strengthen to Jupiter’s demands. Gravity will keep them from bulging, expanding; but every muscle fibre in you will have twice, three times its original strength. Are you excited?”

“I am tired and sick. I want to sleep. What is Jupiter?”

“Jupiter is a planet circling the sun at—never mind, comrade. You have much to learn, but you can assimilate it with much less trouble in your sleep. Go ahead, sleep.”

Sophia retched, was sick. It had been years since she cried. But naked, afraid, bewildered, she cried herself to sleep.

Things happened while she slept, many things. Certain endocrine extracts accelerated her metabolism astonishingly. Within half an hour her heart was pumping blood through her body two hundred beats per minute. An hour later it reached its full rate, almost one thousand contractions every sixty seconds. All her other metabolic functions increased accordingly, and Sophia slept deeply for a week of subjective time—in hours. The same machine which had gleaned everything from her mind far more accurately than a battery of tests, a refinement of the electro-encephalogram, was now played in reverse, giving back to Sophia everything it had taken plus electrospool after electrospool of science, mathematics, logic, economics, history (Marxian, these last two), languages (including English), semantics and certain specialized knowledge she would need later on the Stalintrek.

Still sleeping, Sophia was bathed in a warm whirlpool of soothing liquid; rubbed, massaged, her muscle-toning begun while she rested and regained her strength. Three hours later, objective time, she awoke with a headache and with more thoughts spinning around madly inside her brain than she ever knew existed. Gingerly, she tried standing again, lifting herself nude and dripping wet from a tub of steaming amber stuff. She stood, stretched, permitted her fright to vanish with a quick wave of vertigo which engulfed her. She had been

fed intravenously, but a tremendous hunger possessed her. Before eating, however, she was to find herself in a gymnasium, the air close and stifling. She was massaged again, told to do certain exercises which seemed simple but which she found extremely difficult, forced to run until she thought she would collapse, with her legs, dragging like lead.

She understood, now. Somehow she knew she was on Jupiter, the fifth and largest planet, where the force of gravity is so much greater than on Earth that it is an effort even to walk. She also knew that her metabolic rate had been accelerated beyond all comprehension and that in a comparatively short time—objective time—she would have thrice her original strength. All this she knew without knowing how she knew, and that was the most staggering fact of all. She did what her curt instructors bid, then dragged her aching muscles and her headache into a dining room where tired, forlorn-looking men sat around eating. Well the food at least was good. Sophia attacked it ravenously.

\* \* \* \* \*

It did not take Temple long to realize that the creature running downhill at him, leaving a crushed and broken wake in the purple and green grass, was not human. At first Temple toyed with the idea of a man on horseback, for the creature ran on four limbs and had two left over as arms. Temple gaped.

The whole thing was one piece!

Centaur?

Hardly. Too small, for one thing. No bigger than a man, despite the three pairs of limbs. And then Temple had time to gape no longer, for the creature, whatever it was, flashed past him at what he now had to consider a gallop.

More followed. Different. Temple stared and stared. One could have been a great, sentient hoop, rolling downhill and gathering momentum. If he carried the wheel analogy further, a huge eye stared at him from where the hub would have been. Something else followed with kangaroo leaps. One thick-thewed leg propelled it in tremendous, fifteen-foot strides while its small, flapper-like arms beat the air prodigiously.

Legions of creatures. All fantastically different. *I'm going crazy*, Temple thought, then said it aloud. "I'm going crazy."

Theorizing thus, he heard a whir overhead, whirled, looked up. Something was poised a dozen feet off the ground, a large, box-like object seven or eight feet across, rotors spinning above it. That, at least, he could understand. A helicopter.

"I'm lowering a ladder, Kit. Swing aboard."

Arkalion's voice.

Stunned enough to accept anything he saw, Temple waited for the rope ladder to drop, grasped its end, climbed. He swung his legs over a sill, found himself in a neat little cabin with Arkalion, who hauled the ladder in and did something to the controls. They sped away. Temple had one quick moment of lucid thought before everything which had happened in the last few moments shoved logic aside. What he had observed looked for all the world like a foot-race.

"Where the hell *are* we?" Temple demanded breathlessly.

Arkalion smiled. "Where do you think? Journey's end. Welcome to Nowhere, Kit. Welcome to the place where all your questions can be answered because there's no going back. Sorry I set you down in that field by mistake, incidentally. Those things sometimes happen."

"Can I just throw the questions at you?"

"If you wish. It isn't really necessary, for you will be indoctrinated when we get you over to Earth city where you belong."

"What do you mean, there's no going back? I thought they had a rotation system which for one reason or another wasn't practical at the moment. That doesn't sound like no going back, ever."

Arkalion grunted, shrugged. "Have it your way. I *know*."

"Sorry. Shoot."

"Just how far do you think you have come?"

"Search me. Some other star system, maybe?"

"Maybe. Clean across the galaxy, Kit."

Temple whistled softly. "It isn't something you can grasp just by hearing it. Across the galaxy...."

"That isn't too important just now. How long did you think the journey took?"

Temple nodded eagerly. "That's what gets me. It was amazing, Alaric. Really amazing. The whole trip couldn't have taken more than a moment or two. I don't get it. Did we slip out of normal space into some other—uh, continuum, and speed across the length of the galaxy like that?"

"The answer to your questions is yes. But your statement is way off. The journey did not take seconds, Kit."

"No? Instantaneous?"

"Far more than seconds. To reach here from Earth you traveled five thousand years."

"What?"

"More correctly, it was five thousand years ago that you left Mars. You would need a time machine to return, and there is no such thing. The Earth you know is the length of the galaxy and five thousand years behind you."

It could have been a city in New England, or maybe Wisconsin. Main Street stretched for half a mile from Town Hall to the small department store. Neon tubing brightened every store front, busy proprietors could be seen at work through the large plate glass windows. There was the bustle you might expect on any Main Street in New England or Wisconsin, but you could not draw the parallel indefinitely.

There were only men. No women.

The hills in which the town nestled were too purple—not purple with distance but the natural color of the grass.

A somber red sun hung in the pale mauve sky.

This was Earth City, Nowhere.

Arkalion had deposited Temple in the nearby hills, promised they would see one another again. “It may not be so soon,” Arkalion had said, “but what’s the difference? You’ll spend the rest of your life here. You realize you are lucky, Kit. If you hadn’t come, you would have been dead these five thousand years. Well, good luck.”

Dead—five thousand years. The Earth as he knew it, dust. Stephanie, a fifty generation corpse. Nowhere was right. End of the universe.

Temple shuffled his feet, trudged on into town. A man passed him on the street, stooped, gray-haired. The man nodded, did a mild double-take. *I’m an unfamiliar face*, Temple thought.

“Howdy,” he said. “I’m new here.”

“That’s what I thought, stranger. Know just about everyone in these here parts, I do, and I said to myself, now there’s a newcomer. Funny you didn’t come in the regular way.”

“I’m here,” said Temple.

“Yeah. Funny thing, you get to know everyone. Eh, what you say your name was?”

“Christopher Temple.”

“Make it my business to know everyone. The neighborly way, I always say. Temple, eh? We have one here.”

“One what?”

“Another fellow name of Temple. Jase Temple, son.”

“I’ll be damned!” Temple cried, smiling suddenly. “I will be damned. Tell me, old timer, where can I find him?”

“Might be anyplace. Town’s bigger’n it looks. I tell you, though, Jase Temple’s our co-ordinator. You’ll find him there, the co-ordinator’s office. Town Hall, down the end of the street.”

“I already passed it,” Temple told the man. “And thanks.”

Temple’s legs carried him at a brisk pace, past the row of store fronts and down to the Town Hall. He read a directory, climbed a

flight of stairs, found a door marked:

JASON TEMPLE  
Earth City Co-ordinator.

Heart pounding, Temple knocked, heard someone call, "Come in."

He pushed the door in and stared at his brother, just rising to face him.

"Kit! Kit! What are you doing...so you took the journey too!"

Jason ran to him, clasped his shoulders, pounded them. "You sure are looking fit. Kit, you could have knocked me over with half a feather, coming in like that."

"You're looking great too, Jase," Temple lied. He hadn't seen his brother in five years, had never expected to see him again. But he remembered a full-faced, smiling man somewhat taller than himself, somewhat broader across the shoulders. The Jason he saw looked forty-five or fifty but was hardly out of his twenties. He had fierce, smouldering eyes, gaunt cheeks, graying hair. He seemed a bundle of restless, nervous energy.

"Sit down, Kit. Start talking, kid brother. Start talking and don't stop till next week. Tell me everything. Everything! Tell me about the blue sky and the moon at night and the way the ocean looks on a windy day and...."

"Five years," said Temple. "Five years."

"Five thousand, you mean," Jason reminded him. "It hardly seems possible. How are the folks, Kit?"

"Mom's fine. Pop too. He's sporting a new Chambers Converto. You should see him, Jase. Sharp."

"And Ann?" Jason looked at him hopefully. Ann had been Jason's Stephanie—but for the Nowhere Journey they would have married.

"Ann's married," Temple said.

"Oh. Oh. That's swell, Kit. Really swell. I mean, what the hell, a girl shouldn't wait forever. I told her not to, anyway."

"She waited four years, then met a guy and—"

"A nice guy?"

"The best," said Temple. "You'd like him."

Temple saw the vague hurt come to Jason's smouldering eyes. Then it was the same. One part of Jason wanted her to remain his over an unthinkable gap, another part wanted her to live a good, full life.

"I'm glad," said Jason. "Can't expect a girl to wait without hope...."

"Then there's no hope we'll ever get back?"

Jason laughed harshly. "You tell me. Earth isn't merely sixty thousand light years away. Kit, do you know what a light year is?"

Temple said he thought he did.

"Sixty thousand of them. A dozen eternities. But the Earth we know is also dead. Dead five thousand years. The folks, Center City, Ann,

her husband—all dust. Five thousand years old.... Don't mind me, Kit."

"Sure. Sure, I understand." But Temple didn't, not really. You couldn't take five thousand years and chuck them out the window in what seemed the space of a heart beat and then realize they were gone permanently, forever. Not a period of time as long as all of recorded civilization—you couldn't take it, tack it on after 1992 and accept it. Somehow, Temple realized, the five thousand years were harder to swallow than the sixty thousand light years.

"Well," with a visible effort, Jason snapped out of his reverie. Temple accepted a cigarette gratefully, his first in a long time. *In fifty centuries*, he thought bitterly, burrowing deeper into a funk.

"Well," said Jason, "I'm acting like a prize boob. How selfish can I get? There must be an awful lot you'd like to know, Kit."

"That's all right. I was told I'd be indoctrinated."

"Ordinarily, you would. But there's no shipment now, none for another three months. Say, how the devil *did* you get here?"

"That's a long story. Nowhere Journey, same as you, with a little assist to speed things up on Mars. Jase, tell me this: what are we doing here? What is everyone doing here? What's the Nowhere Journey all about? What kind of a glorified foot-race did I see a while ago, with a bunch of creatures out of the telio science-fiction shows?"

Jason put his own cigarette out, changed his mind, lit another one. "Sort of like the old joke, where does an alien go to register?"

"Sort of."

"It's a big universe," said Jason, evidently starting at the beginning of something.

"I'm just beginning to learn *how* big!"

"It would be pretty unimaginative of mankind to consider itself the only sentient form of life, Earth the only home of intelligence, both from a scientific and a religious point of view. We kind of expected to find—neighbors out in space. Kit, the sky is full of stars, most stars have planets. The universe crawls with life, all sorts of life, all sorts of intelligent life. In short, we are not alone. It would be sort of like taking the jet-shuttle from Washington to New York during the evening rush and expecting to be the only one aboard. In reality, you're lucky to get breathing space.

"There are biped intelligences, like humans. There are radial intelligences, one-legged species, tall, gangling creatures, squat ones, pancake ones, giants, dwarfs. There are green skins and pink skins and coal black—and yes, no skins. There are...but you get the idea."

"Uh-huh."

"Strangely enough, most of these intelligences are on about the same developmental level. It's as if the Creator turned everything on

at once, like a race, and said 'okay, guys get started.' Maybe it's because, as scientists figure, the whole universe got wound up and started working as a unit. I don't know. Anyway, that's the way it is. All the intelligences worth talking about are on about the same cultural level. Atomics, crude spaceflight, wars they can't handle.

"And this is interesting, Kit. Most of 'em are bipedal. Not really human, not fully human. You can see the difference. But seventy-five percent of the races I've encountered have had basic similarities. A case of the Creator trying to figure out the best of all possible life-patterns and coming up with this one. Offers a wide range for action, for adaptation, stuff like that. Anyway, I'm losing track of things."

"Take it easy. From what you tell me I have all the time in the world."

"Well, I said all the races are developmentally parallel. That's almost true. One of them is not. One of them is so far ahead that the rest of us have hardly reached the crawling stage by comparison. One of them is the Super Race, Kit.

"Their culture is old, incredibly old. So old, in fact, that some of us figure it's been hanging around since before the Universe took shape. Maybe that's why all the others are on one level, a few thousand million years behind the Super Race.

"So, take this Super Race. For some reason we can't understand, it seems to be on the skids. That's just figurative. Maybe it's dying out, maybe it wants to pack up and leave the galaxy altogether, maybe it's got other undreamed of business other undreamed of places. Anyway, it wants out. But it's got an eon-old storehouse of culture and maybe it figures someone ought to have access to that and keep the galaxy in running order. But who? That's the problem. Who gets all this information, a million million generations of scientific problems, all carefully worked out? Who, among all the parallel races on all the worlds of the Universe? That's quite a problem, even for our Super Race boys.

"You'd think they'd have ways to solve it, though. With calculating machines or whatever will follow calculating machines after Earthmen and all the others find the next faltering step after a few thousand years. Or with plain horse sense and logic, developed to a point—after millions of years at it—where it never fails. Or solve the problem with something we've never heard of, but solve it anyway."

"What's all this got to do with—? I mean, it's an interesting story and when I get a chance to digest it I'll probably start gasping, but what about Nowhere and...."

"I'm coming to that. Kit, what would you say if I told you that the most intelligent race the Universe has ever produced solves the biggest problem ever handed anyone—by playing games?"

"I'd say you better continue."

"That's the purpose of Nowhere, Kit. Every planet, every race has its Nowhere. We all come here and we play games. Planet with the highest score at the end of God knows how long wins the Universe, with all the science and the wisdom needed to fashion that universe into a dozen different kinds of heaven. And to decide all this, we play games.

"Don't get the wrong idea. I'm not complaining. If the Superboys say we play, then we play. I'd take their word for it if they told me I had fifteen heads. But it's the sort of thing which doesn't let you get much sleep. Oh, Earth has a right to be proud of its record. United North America is in second place on a competition that's as wide as the Universe. But we're not first. Second. And I have a hunch from what's been going on around here that the games are drawing to a close.

"Fantastic, isn't it? Out of thousands of entrants, we're good enough to place second. But some planet out near the star Deneb has us hopelessly outclassed. We might as well get the booby prize. They'll win and own the Universe—us included."

Jason had leaned forward as he spoke, and was sitting on the edge of his chair now. The room was comfortably cool, but sweat beaded his forehead, dripped from his chin.

Temple lit another cigarette, inhaling deeply. "You said the United States—North America—was second. I thought this was a planet-wide competition, planet against planet."

"Earth is the one exception I've been able to find. The Deneb planet heads the list, then comes North America. After that, the planet of a star I never heard of. In fourth place is the Soviet Union."

"I'll be damned," said Temple. "Well, okay. Mind if I store that away for future reference? I've got another question. What kind of—uh, games do we play?"

"You name it. Mental contests. Scientific problems to be worked out with laboratories built to our specifications. Emotional problems with scores of men driven neurotic or worse every year. Problems of adaptability. Responses to environmental challenge. Stamina contests. Tests of strength, of endurance. Tests to determine depths of emotion. Tests to determine objectivity in what should be an objective situation. But the way everything is organized it's almost like a giant-sized, never ending Olympic Games, complete with some cockeyed sports events too, by the way."

"With all the pageantry, too?"

"No. But that's another story."

"Anyway, what I saw was a foot-race! And sorry, Jase, but I have another question."



Jason shrugged, spread his hands wide.

"How come all this talk about rotation? It isn't possible, not with a fifty century gap."

"I know. They just let us in on that little deal a couple of years ago. Till then, we didn't know. We thought it was distance only. In time, after all this was over, we could go home. That's what we thought," Jason said bitterly. "Actually, it's twice five thousand years. Five to come here, five to return. Ten thousand years separate us from the Earth we know, and even if we could go home, that wouldn't be going home at all—to Earth ten thousand years in the future.

"Oh, they had us hoodwinked. Afraid we might say no or something. They never mentioned the length or duration of the trip. I don't understand it, none of us do and we have some top scientists here. Something to do with suspended animation, with contra-terrene matter, with teleportation, something about latent extra-sensory powers in everyone, about the ability to break down an object—or a creature or a man—to its component atoms, to reverse—that's the word, reverse—those atoms and send them spinning off into space as contra-terrene matter.

"It all boils down to putting a man in a machine on Mars, pulling a lever, materializing him here five thousand years later." Jason smiled with only a trace of humor. "Any questions?"

"About a thousand," said Temple. "I—"

Something buzzed on Jason's desk and Temple watched him pick up a microphone, say: "Co-ordinator speaking. What's up?"

The voice which answered, clear enough to be in the room with them and without the faintest trace of mechanical or electrical transfer, spoke in a strange, liquid-syllabled language Temple had never heard. Jason responded in the same language, with an apparent ease which surprised Temple—until he remembered that his brother had always had a knack of picking up foreign languages. Maybe that was why he held the Co-ordinator's job—whatever it was he co-ordinated.

There was fluency in the way Jason spoke, and alarm. The trouble-lines etched deeply on his face stood out sharply, his eyes, if possible, grew more intense. "Well," he said, putting the mike down and staring at Temple without seeing him, "I'm afraid that does it."

"What's the trouble?"

"Everything."

"Anything I can do?"

"Item. The Superboys have discovered that Earth has two contingents here—us and the Soviets. They're mad. Item. Something will be done about it. Item. Soviet Russia has made a suggestion, or that is, its people here. They will put forth a champion to match one

of our own choosing in the toughest grind of all, something to do with responding to environmental challenge, which doesn't mean a hell of a lot unless you happen to know something about it. Shall I go on?"

And, when Temple nodded avidly. "We automatically lose by default. One of the rules of that particular game is that the contestant must be a newcomer. It's the sort of game you have to know nothing about, and incidentally, it's also the sort of game a man can get killed at. Well, the Soviets have a whole contingent of newcomers to pick from. We don't have any. As the Superboys see it, that's our own tough luck. We lose by default."

"It seems to me—"

"How can anything 'seem to you?' You're new here.... I'm sorry Kit. What were you saying?"

"No. Go ahead."

"That's only the half of it. Right after Russia takes our place and we're scratched off the list, the games go into their final phase. That was the rumor all along, and it's just been confirmed. Interesting to see what they do with all the contestants *after* the games are over, after there's no more Nowhere Journey."

"We could go back where we came from."

"Ten thousand years in the future?"

"I'm not afraid."

"Well, anyway, the Soviets put up a man, we can't match him. So it looks like the U.S.S.R. represents Earth officially. Not that it matters. We hardly have the chance of a very slushy snowball in a very hot hell. But still—"

"Our contestant, this guy who meets the Russians' challenge, has to be a newcomer?"

"That's what I said. Well, we can close up shop, I guess."

"You made a mistake. You said no newcomers have arrived. I'm here, Jase. I'm your man. Bring on your Russian Bear." Temple smiled grimly.

## CHAPTER VIII

"You got to hand it to Temple's kid brother."

"Yeah. Cool as ice cubes."

"Are you guys kidding? He doesn't know what's in store for him, that's all."

"Do *you*?"

"Now that you mention it, no. Isn't a man here who can say for sure what kind of environmental challenges he'll have to respond to. Hypno-surgery sees to it the guys who went through the thing won't talk about it. As if that isn't security enough, the subject's got to be a brand new arrival!"

“Shh! Here he comes.”

The brothers Temple entered Earth City’s one tavern quietly, but on their arrival all the speculative talk subsided. The long bar, built to accommodate half a hundred pairs of elbows comfortably, gleamed with a luster unfamiliar to Temple. It might have been marble, but marble translucent rather than opaque, giving a beautiful three-dimensional effect to the surface patterns.

“What will it be?” Jason demanded.

“Whatever you’re drinking is fine.”

Jason ordered two scotches, neat, and the brothers drank. When Jason got a refill he started talking. “Does T.A.T. mean anything to you, Kit?”

“Tat? Umm—no. Wait a minute! T.A.T. Isn’t that some kind of protective psychological test?”

“That’s it. You’re shown a couple of dozen pictures, more or less ambiguous, never cut and dry. Each one comes from a different stratum of the social environment, and you’re told to create a dramatic situation, a story, for each picture. From your stories, for which you draw on your whole background as a human being, the psychometrician should be able to build a picture of your personality and maybe find out what, if anything, is bothering you.”

“What’s that to do with this response to environmental challenge thing?”

“Well,” said Jason, drinking a third scotch, “the Super Boys have evolved T.A.T. to its ultimate. T.A.T.—that stands for Thematic Apperception Test. But in E.C.R.—environmental challenge and response, you don’t see a picture and create a dramatic story around it. Instead, you get thrust into the picture, the situation, and you have to work out the solution—or suffer whatever consequences the particular environmental challenge has in store for you.”

“I think I get you. But it’s all make believe, huh?”

“That’s the hell of it,” Jason told him. “No, it’s not. It is and it isn’t. I don’t know.”

“You make it perfectly clear,” Temple smiled. “The red-headed boy combed his brown hair, wishing it weren’t blond.”

Jason shrugged. “I’m sorry. For reasons you already know, the E.C.R. isn’t very clear to me—or to anyone. You’re not actually in the situation in a physical sense, but it can affect you physically. You *feel* you’re there, you actually live everything that happens to you, getting injured if an injury occurs...and dying if you get killed. It’s permanent, although you might actually be sleeping at the time. So whether it’s real or not is a question for philosophy. From your point of view, from the point of view of someone going through it, it’s real.”

“So I become part of this—uh, game in about an hour.”

“Right. You and whoever the Russians offer as your competition. No one will blame you if you want to back out, Kit; from what you tell me, you haven’t even been adequately trained on Mars.”

“If you draw on the entire background of your life for this E.C.R., then you don’t need training. Shut up and stop worrying. I’m not backing out of anything.”

“I didn’t think you would, not if you’re still as much like your old man as you used to be. Kit...good luck.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The fact that the technicians working around him were Earthmen permitted Temple to relax a little. Probably, it was planned that way, for entering the huge white cube of a building and ascending to the twelfth level on a moving ramp Temple had spotted many figures, not all of them human. If he had been strapped to the table by unfamiliar aliens, if the scent of alien flesh—or non-flesh—had been strong in the room, if the fingers—or appendages—which greased his temples and clamped an electrode to each one had not felt like human fingers, if the men talking to him had spoken in voices too harsh or too sibilant for human vocal chords—if all that had been the case whatever composure still remained his would have vanished.

“I’m Dr. Olson,” said one white-gowned figure. “If any injuries occur while you lie here, I’m permitted to render first aid.”

“The same for limited psychotherapy,” said a shorter, heavier man. “Though a fat lot of good it does when we never know what’s bothering you, and don’t have the time to work on it even if we did know.”

“In short,” said a third man who failed to identify himself, “you may consider yourself as the driver of one of those midget rocket racers. Do they still have them on Earth? Good. You are the driver, and we here in this room are the mechanics waiting in your pit. If anything goes wrong, you can pull out of the race temporarily and have it repaired. But in this particular race there is no pulling out: all repairs are strictly of a first-aid nature and must be done while you continue whatever you are doing. If you break your finger and find a splint appearing on it miraculously, don’t say you weren’t warned.”

“Best of luck to you, young man,” said the psychotherapist.

“Here we go,” said the doctor, finding the large vein on the inside of Temple’s forearm and plunging a needle into it.

Temple’s senses whirled instantly, but as his vision clouded he thought he saw a large, complex device swing down from the ceiling and bathe his head in warming radiation. He blinked, squinted, could see nothing but a swirling, cloudy opacity.

\* \* \* \* \*

Approximately two seconds later, Sophia Androvna Petrovitch watched as the white-gowned comrade tied a rubber strap around her arm, waited for the vein to swell with blood, then forced a needle in through its thick outer layer. Was that a nozzle overhead? No, rather a lens, for from it came amber warmth...which soon faded, with everything else, into thick, churning fog....

Temple was abruptly aware of running, plunging headlong and blindly through the fiercest storm he had ever seen. Gusts of wind whipped at him furiously. Rain cascaded down in drenching torrents. Foliage, brambles, branches struck against his face; mud sucked at his feet. Big animal shapes lumbered by in the green gloom, as frightened by the storm as was Temple.

His head darted this way and that, his eyes could see the gnarled tree trunks, the dense greenery, the lianas, creepers and vines of a tropical rain forest—but dimly. Green murk swirled in like thick smoke with every gust of wind, with the rain obscuring vision almost completely.

Temple ran until his lungs burned and he thought he must exhale fire. His leaden feet fought the mud with growing difficulty for every stride he took. He ran wildly and in no set direction, convinced only that he must find shelter or perish. Twice he crashed bodily into trees, twice stumbled to his knees only to pull himself upright again, sucking air painfully into his lungs and cutting out in a fresh direction.

He ran until his legs balked. He fell, collapsing first at the knees, then the waist, then flopping face down in the mud. Something prodded his back as he fell and reaching behind him weakly Temple was aware for the first time that a bow and a quiver of arrows hung suspended from his shoulders by a strong leather thong. He wore nothing but a loin cloth of some nameless animal skin and he wondered idly if he had slain the animal with the weapon he carried. Yet when he tried to recollect he found he could not. He remembered nothing but his frantic flight through the rain forest, as if all his life he had run in a futile attempt to leave the rain behind him.

Now as he lay there, the mud sucking at his legs, his chest, his armpits, he could not even remember his name. Did he have one? Did he have a life before the rain forest? Then why did he forget?

A sense not fully developed in man and called intuition by those who fail to understand it made him prop his head up on his hands and squint through the downpour. There was something off there in the foliage...someone....

A woman.

Temple's breath caught in his throat sharply. The woman stood half a dozen paces off, observing him coolly with hands on flanks. She stood tall and straight despite the storm and from trim ankles to long,

lithe legs to flaring loin-clothed hips, to supple waist and tawny skin of fine bare breasts and shoulders, to proud, haughty face and long dark hair loose in the storm and glistening with rain, she was magnificent. Her long, bronzed body gleamed with wetness and Temple realized she was tall as he, a wild beautiful goddess of the jungle. She was part of the storm and he accepted her—but strangely, with the same fear the storm evoked. She would make a lover the whole world might relish (what world, Temple thought in confusion?) but she would make a terrible foe.

And foe she was....

“I want your bow and arrows,” she told him.

Temple wanted to suggest they share the weapon, but somehow he knew in this world which was like a dream and could tell him things the way a dream would and yet was vividly real, that the woman would share nothing with anybody.

“They are mine,” Temple said, climbing to his knees. He remembered the animal-shapes lumbering by in the storm and he knew that he and the animals would both stalk prey when the storm subsided and he would need the bow and arrows.

The woman moved toward him with a liquid motion beautiful to behold, and for the space of a heartbeat Temple watched her come. “I will take them,” she said.

Temple wasn’t sure if she could or not, and although she was a woman he feared her strangely. Again, it was as if something in this dream-world real-world could tell him more than he should know.

Making up his mind, Temple sprang to his feet, whirled about and ran. He was plunging through the wild storm once more, blinded by the occasional flashes of jagged green lightning, deafened by the peals of thunder which followed. And he was being pursued.

Minutes, hours, more than hours—for an eternity Temple ran. A reservoir of strength he never knew he possessed provided the energy for each painful step and running through the storm seemed the most natural thing in the world to him. But there came a time when his strength failed, not slowly, but with shocking suddenness. Temple fell, crawled a ways, was still.

It took him minutes to realize the storm no longer buffeted him, more minutes to learn he had managed to crawl into a cave. He had no time to congratulate himself on his good fortune, for something stirred outside.

“I am coming in,” the woman called to him from the green murk.

Temple strung an arrow to his bow, pulled the string back and faced the cave’s entrance squatting on his heels. “Then your first step shall be your last. I’ll shoot to kill.” And he meant it.

Silence from outside. Deafening.

Temple felt sweat streaming under his armpits; his hands were clammy, his hands trembled.

"You haven't seen the last of me," the woman promised. After that, Temple knew she was gone. He slept as one dead.

When Temple awoke, bright sunlight filtered in through the foliage outside his cave. Although the ground was a muddy ruin, the storm had stopped. Edging to the mouth of the cave, Temple spread the foliage with his hands, peered cautiously outside. Satisfied, he took his bow and arrows and left the cave, pangs of hunger knotting his stomach painfully.

The cave had been weathered in the side of a short, steep abutment a dozen paces from a gushing, swollen stream. Temple followed the course of the stream as it twisted through the jungle, ranging half a mile from his cave until the water course widened to form a water-hole. All morning Temple waited there, crouching in the grass, until one by one, the forest animals came to drink. He selected a small hare-like thing, notched an arrow to his bow, let it fly.

The animal jumped, collapsed, began to slink away into the undergrowth, dragging the arrow from its hindquarters. Temple darted after it, caught it in his hands and bashed its life out against the bole of a tree. Returning to his cave he found two flinty stones, shredded a fallen branch and nursed the shards dry in the strong sunlight. Soon he made a fire and ate.

\* \* \* \*

In the days which followed, Temple returned to the water-hole and bagged a new catch every time he ventured forth. Things went so well that he began to range further and further from his cave exploring. Once however, he returned early to the water-hole and found footprints in the soft mud of its banks.

The woman.

That she had been observing him while he had hunted had never occurred to Temple, but now that the proof lay clearly before his eyes, the old feeling of uncertainty came back. And the next day, when he crept stealthily to the water-hole and saw the woman squatting there in the brush, waiting for him, he fled back to his cave.

The thought hit him suddenly. If she were stalking him, why must he flee as from his own shadow? There would be no security for either of them until either one or the other were gone—and gone meant dead. Then Temple would do his own stalking.

For several nights Temple hardly slept. He could have found the water-hole blindfolded merely by following the stream. Each night he would reach the hole and work, digging with a sharp stone, until he had fashioned a pit fully ten feet deep and six feet across. This he

covered with branches, twigs, leaves and finally dirt.

When he returned in the morning he was satisfied with his work. Unless the woman made a careful study of the area, she would never see the pit. All that day Temple waited with his back to the water-hole, facing the camouflaged pit, the trap he had set, but the woman failed to appear. When she also did not come on the second day, he began to think his plan would not work.

The third day, Temple arrived with the sun, sat as before in the tall grass between the pit and the water-hole and waited. Several paces beyond his hidden trap he could see the tall trees of the jungle with vines and creepers hanging from their branches. At his back, a man's length behind him was the water-hole, its deepest waters no more than waist-high.

Temple waited until the sun stood high in the sky, then was fascinated as a small antelope minced down to the water-hole for a drink. *You'll make a fine breakfast tomorrow, he thought, smiling.*

Something, that strange sixth sense again, made Temple turn around and stand up. He had time for a brief look, a hoarse cry.

The woman had been the cleverer. She had set the final trap. She stood high up on a branch of one of the trees beyond the hidden pit and for an instant Temple saw her fine figure clearly, naked but for the loincloth. Then the soft curves became spring-steel.

The woman arched her body there on the high branch, grasping a stout vine and rocking back with it. Temple raised his bow, set an arrow to let it fly. But by then, the woman was in motion.

Long and lithe and graceful, she swung down on her vine, gathering momentum as she came. Her feet almost brushed the lip of Temple's pit at the lowest arc of her flight, but she clung to the vine and it began to swing up again like a pendulum—toward Temple.

At the last moment he hunched his shoulder and tried to raise his arms for protection. The woman was quicker. She gathered her legs up under her, still clutching the vine with her slim, strong hands. The vine's arc carried her up at him; her knees were at a level with his head and she brought them up savagely, close together striking Temple brutally at the base of his jaw. Temple screamed as his head was jerked back with terrible force.

The bow flew from his fingers and he fell into the water-hole, flat on his back.

Sophia let the vine carry her out over the water, then dropped from it. Waist deep, she waded to where the man lay, unconscious on his back, half in, half out of the shallowest part of the water. She reached him, prodded his chest with her foot. When he did not stir, she rocked her weight down gracefully on her long leg, forcing his head under water. With a haughty smile, she watched the bubbles rise....



In the small room where Temple's body lay in repose on a table the white-smocked doctor looked at the psychotherapist questioningly. "What's happening?"

"Can't tell, doctor. But—"

Suddenly Temple's still body rocked convulsively, his neck stretched, his head shot up and back. Blood trickled from his mouth.

The doctor thrust out expert hands, examined Temple's jaw dexterously.

"Broken?" the psychotherapist demanded in a worried voice.

"No. Dislocated. He looks like he's been hit by a sledge hammer, wherever he is now, whatever's happening. This E.C.R. is the damndest thing."

Temple's still form shuddered convulsively. He began to gasp and cough, obviously fighting for breath. An ugly blue swelling had by now lumped the base of his jaw.

"What's happening?" demanded the psychotherapist.

"I can't be sure," said the doctor, shaking his head. "He seems to have difficulty in breathing...it's as if he were—drowning."

"Bad. Anything we can do?"

"No. We wait until this particular sequence ends." The doctor examined Temple again. "If it doesn't end soon, this man will die of asphyxiation."

"Call it off," the psychotherapist pleaded. "If he dies now Earth will be represented by Russia. Call it off!"

Someone entered the room. "I have the authority," he said, selecting a hypodermic from the doctor's rack and piercing the skin of Temple's forearm with it. "This first test has gone far enough. The Russian entry is clearly the winner, but Temple must live if he is to compete in another."

The racking convulsions which shook Temple's body subsided. He ceased his choking, began to breathe regularly. With grim swiftness, the doctor went to work on Temple's dislocated jaw while the man who had stopped the contest rendered artificial respiration.

The man was Alaric Arkalion.

The Comrade Doctor was exultant. "Jupiter training, comrade, has given us a victory."

"How can you be sure?"

"Our entrant is unharmed, the contest has been called. Wait...she is coming to."

Sophia stretched, rubbed her bruised knees, sat up.

"What happened, Comrade?" the doctor demanded.

“My knees ache,” said Sophia, rubbing them some more. “I—I killed him, I think. Strange, I never dreamed it would be that real.”

“In a sense, it *was* real. If you killed the American, he will stay dead.”

“Nothing mattered but that world we were in, a fantastic place. Now I remember everything, all the things I couldn’t remember then.”

“But your—ah, dream—what happened?”

Sophia rubbed her bruised knees a third time, ruefully. “I knocked him unconscious with these. I forced his head under water and drowned him. But—before I could be sure I finished the job—I came back.... Funny that I should want to kill him without compunction, without reason.” Sophia frowned, sat up. “I don’t think I want anymore of this.”

The doctor surveyed her coldly. “This is your task on the Stalintrek. This you will do.”

“I killed him without a thought.”

“Enough. You will rest and get ready for the second contest.”

“But if he’s dead—”

“Apparently he’s not, or we would have been informed, Comrade Petrovitch.”

“That is true,” agreed the second man, who had remained silent until now. “Prepare for another test, Comrade.”

Sophia was on the point of arguing again. After all it wasn’t fair. If in the dream-worlds which were not dream worlds she was motivated by but one factor and that to destroy the American and if she faced him with the strength of her Jupiter training it would hardly be a contest. And now that she could think of the American without the all-consuming hatred the dream world had fostered in her, she realized he had been a pleasant-looking young man, quite personable, in fact. *I could like him*, Sophia thought and hoped fervently she had not drowned him. Still, if she had volunteered for the Stalintrek and this was the job they assigned her....

“I need no rest,” she told the doctor, hardly trusting herself, for she realized she might change her mind. “I am ready any time you are.”

## CHAPTER IX

His name was Temple and it was the year 1960.

Christopher Temple had problems. He had his own life, too, which had nothing to do with the life of the real Christopher Temple, departed thirty-odd years later on the Nowhere Journey. Or rather, this *was* Christopher Temple, living his second E.C.R.... Temple who had lost once, and who, if he lost again, would take the dreams and hopes of the Western world down into the dust of defeat with him. But as the fictional (although in a certain sense, real) Christopher Temple

of 1960, he knew nothing of this.

The world could go to pot. The world was going to pot, anyway. Temple shuddered as he poured a fourth Canadian, downing it in a tasteless, burning gulp. Temple was a thermo-nuclear engineer with government subsidized degrees from three universities including the fine new one at Desert Rock. Temple was a thermo-nuclear engineer with top-secret government clearance. Temple was a thermo-nuclear engineer with more military secrets buzzing around inside his head than in a warehouse of burned Pentagon files.

Temple was also a thermo-nuclear engineer whose wife spied for the Russians.

He'd found out quite by accident, not meaning to eavesdrop at all. Returning home early one afternoon because the production engineer called a halt while further research was done on certain unstable isotopes, Temple was surprised to find his wife had a gentleman caller. He heard their voices clearly from where he stood out in the sun-parlor, and for a ridiculous instant he was torn between slinking upstairs and ignoring them altogether or barging into the living room like a high school boy flushed with jealousy. The mature thing to do, of course, was neither, and Temple was on the point of walking politely into the living room, saying hello and waiting for an introduction, when snatches of the conversation stopped him cold.

"Silly Charles! Kit doesn't suspect a thing. I would *know*."

"How can you be sure?"

"Intuition."

"On a framework of intuition you would place the fate of Red Empire?"

"Empire, Charles?" Temple could picture Lucy's raised eyebrow. He listened now, hardly breathing. For one wild moment he thought he would retreat upstairs and forget the whole thing. Life would be much simpler that way. A meaningless surrender to unreality, however, and it couldn't be done.

"Yes, Empire. Oh, not the land-grabbing, slave-dominating sort of things the Imperialists used to attempt, but a more subtle and hence more enduring empire. Let the world call us Liberator, we shall have Empire."

Lucy laughed, a sound which Temple loved. "You may keep your ideology, Charles. Play with it, bathe in it, get drunk on it or drown yourself in it. I want my money."

"You are frank."

Temple could picture Lucy's shrug. "I am a paid, professional spy. By now you have most of the information you need. I shall have the rest tonight."

"I'll see you in hell first!" Temple cried in rage, stalking into the

room and almost smiling in spite of the situation when he realized how melodramatic his words must sound.

"Kit! Kit..." Lucy raised hand to mouth, then backed away flinching as if she had been struck.

"Yeah, Kit. A political cuckold, or does Charles get other services from you as well?"

"Kit, you don't..."

The man named Charles motioned for silence. Dapper, clean-cut, good-looking except for a surly, pouting mouth, he was a head shorter than either Temple or Lucy. "Don't waste your words, Sophia. Temple overheard us."

*Sophia?* thought Temple. "Sophia?" he said.

Charles nodded coolly. "The real Mrs. Temple was observed, studied, her every habit and whim catalogued by experts. A plastic surgeon, a psychologist, a sociologist, a linguist, a whole battery of experts molded Sophia here into a new Mrs. Temple. I must congratulate them, for you never suspected."

"Lucy?" Temple demanded dully. Reason stood suspended in a limbo of objective acceptance and subjective disbelief.

"Mrs. Temple was eliminated. Regrettable because we don't deal in senseless mayhem, but necessary."

Temple was not aware of leaving limbo until he felt the bruising contact of his knuckles with Charles' jaw. The short man toppled, fell at his feet. "Get up!" Temple cried, then changed his mind and tensed himself to leap upon the prone figure.

"Hold it," Charles told him quietly, wiping blood from his lips with one hand, drawing an automatic from his pocket with the other. "You'd better freeze, Temple. You die if you don't."

Temple froze, watched Charles slither away across the high-piled green carpet until, safely away across the room, he came upright groggily. He turned to the dead Lucy's double. "What do you think, Sophia?"

"I don't know. We could get out of here, probably get along without the final information."

"That isn't what I mean. Naturally, we'll never receive the final facts. I mean, what do you think about Temple?"

Sophia said she didn't know.

"Left alone, he would go to the police. Kidnapped, he would be worse than useless. Harmful, actually, for the authorities would suspect something. Even worse if we killed him. The point is, we don't want the authorities to think Temple gave information to anybody."

"Gave is hardly the word," said Sophia. "I was a good wife, but also a good gleaner. One hundred thousand dollars, Charles."

"You bitch," Temple said.

“Later,” Charles told the woman. “The solution is this, Sophia: we must kill Temple, but it must look like suicide.”

Sophia frowned in pretty concern. “Do we have to...kill him?”

“What’s the matter, my dear? Have you been playing the wifely role too long? If Temple stands in the way of Red Empire, Temple must die.”

Temple edged forward.

“Uh-uh,” said Charles, “mustn’t.” He waved the automatic and Temple subsided.

“Is that right?” Sophia demanded. “Well, you listen to me. I have nothing to do with your Red Empire. I fled the Iron Curtain, came here to live voluntarily—”

“Do you really think it was on a voluntary basis that you went? We allowed you to go, Sophia. We encouraged it. That way, the job of our technicians was all the simpler. Whether you like it or not, you have been a cog in the machine of Red Empire.”

“I still don’t see why he has to die.”

“Leave thinking to those who can. You have a smile, a body, a certain way with men. I will think. I think that Temple should die.”

“I don’t,” Sophia said.

“We’re delaying needlessly. The man dies.” And Charles raised his automatic, sufficiently irked to forget his suicide plan.

A gap of eight or nine feet separated the two men. It might as well have been infinity—and it would be soon, for Temple. He saw Charles’ small hand tighten about the automatic, saw the trigger finger grow white. The weapon pointed at a spot just above his navel and briefly he found himself wondering what it would feel like for a slug to rip into his stomach, burning a path back to his spine. He decided to make the gesture at least, if he could do no more. He would jump for Charles.

Sophia beat him to it—and because Lucy was dead and Sophia looked exactly like her and Temple could not quite accept the fact, it seemed the most natural thing in the world. Cat-quick, Sophia leaped upon Charles’ back and they went down together in a twisting, thrashing tangle of arms and legs.

Temple did not wait for an invitation. He launched himself down after them, and then things began to happen...fast.

Sophia rolled clear, rose to her hands and knees, panting. Charles sat up cursing, nursing a badly scratched face. Temple hurtled at him, stretched him on his back again, began to pound hard fists into his face.

Charles did not have the automatic. Neither did Temple.

Something exploded against the back of Temple’s head violently, throwing him off Charles and tumbling him over. Dimly he saw

Sophia following through, the automatic in her hand, butt foremost. Temple's senses reeled. He tried to rise, succeeded only in a kind of shuddering slither before he subsided. He wavered between consciousness and unconsciousness, heard as in a dream snatches of conversation.

"Shoot him...shoot him!"

"Shut up...I have...gun...go to hell."

"...kill...only way."

"My way is different...out of here...discuss later."

"...feel..."

"I said...out of here..."

The voices became a meaningless liquid torrent cascading into a black pit.

\* \* \* \*

Now Temple sat with a water-glass a third full of Canadian in his hand, every once in a while reaching up gingerly to explore the bruised swelling on his head, the blood-matted hair which covered it. To be a cuckold was one thing, but to be the naive, political pawn sort of cuckold who is not a cuckold at all, he told himself, is far worse. To live with his woman, eat the meals she cooked for him, talk to her, think she understood him, sympathize with him, to make love to her with passion while she responds with play-acting for a hundred thousand dollar salary was suddenly the most emasculating thing in the world for Temple. He had not thought to ask how long it had been going on. Better, perhaps, if he never knew. And somewhere lost in the maze of his thoughts was the grimmest, bleakest reality of them all: Lucy was dead. Lucy—dead. But where did Lucy leave off, where did Sophia begin? Was Lucy dead that night they returned more than a little drunk from the Chamber's party, that night they danced in the living room until dawn obscured the stars and he carried Lucy upstairs. Lucy or Sophia? And the day they motored to the lake, their secret lake, hardly more than a dammed, widened stream and dreamed of the things they could do when the Cold War ended? Lucy—or Sophia? Had he ever noticed a difference in the way Lucy-Sophia cooked, in the way she spoke, the way she let him make love to her? He thought himself into a man-sized headache and found no answers. This way at least the loss of his wife was not as traumatic as it might have been. He knew not when she died or how and, in fact, Lucy-Sophia seemed so much like the real thing that he did not know where he could stop loving and start hating.

And the girl, the Russian girl, had saved his life. Why? He couldn't answer that one either, unless if it were as Charles suggested: Sophia had studied Lucy so carefully, had learned her likes and dislikes, her

wants and desires, had memorized and practised every quirk of her character to such an extent that Sophia was Lucy in essence.

Which, Temple thought, would make it all the harder to seek out Sophia and kill her.

That was the answer, the only answer. Temple felt a dull ache where his heart should have been, a pressure, a pounding, an unpleasant, unfamiliar lack of feeling. If he took his story to the F.B.I. he had no doubt that Charles, Sophia and whoever else worked this thing with them would be caught, but he, Temple, would find himself with a lifelong, unslakable emotional thirst. He had to quench it now and then feel sorry so that he might heal. He had to quench it with Sophia's blood...alone.

\* \* \* \*

He found her a week later at their lake. He had looked everywhere and had about given up, almost, in fact, ready to turn his story over to the police. But he had to think and their lake was the place for that.

Apparently Sophia had the same idea. Temple parked on the highway half a mile from their lake, made his way slowly through the woods, golden dappled with sunlight. He heard the waters gushing merrily, heard the sounds of some small animal rushing off through the woods. He saw Sophia.

She lay on their sunning rock in shorts and halter, completely relaxed, an opened magazine face down on the rock beside her, a pair of sunglasses next to it. She had one knee up, one leg stretched out, one forearm shielding her eyes from the sun, one arm down at her side. Seeing her thus, Temple felt the pressure of his automatic in its holster under his arm. He could draw it out, kill her before she was aware of his presence. Would that make him feel better? Five minutes ago, he would have said yes. Now he hesitated. Kill her, who seemed as completely Lucy as he was Temple? Send a bullet ripping through the body which he had known and loved, or the body that had seemed so much like it he had failed to tell the difference?

Murder—Lucy?

"No," he said aloud. "Her name is Sophia."

The girl sat up, startled. "Kit," she said.

"Lucy."

"You can't make up your mind, either." She smiled just like Lucy.

Dumbly, he sat down next to her on the rock. Strong sunlight had brought a fine dew of perspiration to the bronzed skin of her face. She got a pack of cigarettes out from under the magazine, lit one, offered it to Temple, lit another and smoked it. "Where do we go from here?" she wanted to know.

"I—"

"You came to kill me, didn't you? Is that the only way you can ever feel better, Kit?"

"I—" He was going to deny it, then think.

"Don't deny it. Please." She reached in under his jacket, withdrawing her hand with the snub-nosed automatic in it. "Here," she said, giving it to him.

He took the gun, hefted it, let it fall, clattering, on the rock.

"Listen," she said. "I could have told you I was Lucy. If I said now that I am Lucy and if I kept on saying it, you'd believe me. You'd believe me because you'd want to."

"Well," said Temple.

"I am not Lucy. Lucy is dead. But...but I was Lucy in everything but being Lucy. I thought her thoughts, dreamed her dreams, loved her loves."

"You killed her."

"No. I had nothing to do with that. She was killed, yes. Not by me. Kit, if I asked you when Lucy stopped, and...when I began, could you tell me?"

He had often thought about that. "No," he said truthfully. "You're as much my wife as—she was."

She clutched at his hand impulsively. Then, when he failed to respond, she withdrew her own hand. "Then—then I *am* Lucy. If I am Lucy in every way, Lucy never died."

"You betrayed me. You stood by while murder was committed. You are guilty of espionage."

"Lucy loved you. I am Lucy...."

"...Betrayed me...."

"For a hundred thousand dollars. For the chance to live a normal life, for the chance to forget Leningrad in the wintertime, watery potato soup, rags for clothing, swaggering commissars, poverty, disease. Do you think I realized I could fall in love with you so completely? If I did, don't you think that would have changed things? I am not Sophia, Kit. I was, but I am not. They made me Lucy. Lucy can't be dead, not if I am she in every way."

"What can we do?"

"I don't know. I only want to be your wife...."

"Well, then tell me," he said bitterly. "Shall I go back to the plant and continue working, knowing all the time that our most closely guarded secret is in Russian hands and that my wife is responsible?" He laughed. "Shall I do that?"

"Your secrets never went anywhere."

"Shall I...*what*?"

"Your secrets never went anywhere. Charles is dead. I have destroyed all that we took. I am not Russian any longer. American.



They made me American. They made me Lucy. I want to go right on being Lucy, your wife."

Temple said nothing for a long time. He realized now he could not kill her. But everything else she suggested.... "Tell me," he said. "Tell me, how long have you been Lucy? You've got to tell me that."

"How long have we been married?"

"You know how long. Three years."

Sophia crushed her cigarette out on the rock, wiped perspiration (tears?) from her cheek with the back of her hand. "You have never known anyone but me in your marriage bed, Kit."

"You—you're lying."

"No. They did what they did on the eve of your marriage. I have been your wife for as long as you have had one."

Temple's head whirled. It had been a quick courtship. He had known Lucy only two weeks in those hectic post-graduate days of 1957. But for fourteen brief days, it was Sophia he had known all along.

"Sophia, I—"

"There is no Sophia, not any more."

He had hardly known Lucy, the real Lucy. This girl here was his wife, always had been. Had the first fourteen days with Lucy been anything but a dream? He was sorry Lucy had died—but the Lucy he had thought dead was Sophia, very much alive.

He took her in his arms, almost crushing her. He held her that way, kissed her savagely, letting passion of a different sort take the place of murder.

*This is my woman*, he thought, and awoke on his white pallet in Nowhere.

\* \* \* \*

"I am awake," said Temple.

"We see that. You shouldn't be."

"No?"

"No. There is one more dream."

Temple dozed restfully but was soon aware of a commotion. Strangely, he did not care. He was too tired to open his eyes, anyway. Let whatever was going to happen, happen. He wanted his sleep.

But the voice persisted.

"This is highly irregular. You came in here once and—"

"I did you a favor, didn't I?" (That voice is familiar, Temple thought.)

"Well, yes. But what now?"

"Temple's record is now one and one. In the second sequence he was the victor. The Soviet entry had to extract certain information

from him and turn it over to her people. She extracted the information well enough but somehow Temple made her change her mind. The information never went anyplace. How Temple managed to play counterspy I don't know, but he played it and won."

"That's fine. But what do you want?"

"The final E.C.R. is critical." (The voice was Arkalion's!) "How critical, I can't tell you. Sufficient though, if you know that you lose no matter how Temple fares. If the Russian woman defeats Temple, you lose."

"Naturally."

"Let me finish. If Temple defeats the Russian woman, you also lose. Either way, Earth is the loser. I haven't time to explain what you wouldn't understand anyway. Will you cooperate?"

"Umm-mm. You did save Temple's life. Umm-mm, yes. All right."

"The third dream sequence is the wrong dream, the wrong contest with the wrong antagonist at the wrong time, when a far more important contest is brewing...with the fate of Earth as a reward for the victor."

"What do you propose?"

"I will arrange Temple's final dream. But if he disappears from this room, don't be alarmed. It's a dream of a different sort. Temple won't know it until the dream progresses, you won't know it until everything is concluded, but Temple will fight for a slave or a free Earth."

"Can't you tell us more?"

"There is no time, except to say that along with the rest of the Galaxy, you've been duped. The Nowhere Journey is a grim, tragic farce."

"Awaken, Kit!"

Temple awoke into what he thought was the third and final dream. Strange, because this time he knew where he was and why, knew also that he was dreaming, even remembered vividly the other two dreams.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Stealth," said Arkalion, and led Temple through long, white-walled corridors. They finally came to a partially open door and paused there. Peering within, Temple saw a room much like the one he had left, with two white-gowned figures standing anxiously over a table. And prone on the table was Sophia, whom Temple had loved short moments before, in his second dream. Moments? Years. (Never, except in a dream.)

"She's lovely," Arkalion whispered.

"I know." Like himself, Sophia was garbed in a loose jumper and slacks.

“Stealth,” said Arkalion again. “Haste.” Arkalion disappeared.

“Well,” Temple told himself. “What now? At least in the other dreams I was thrust so completely into things, I knew what to do.” He rubbed his jaw grimly. “Not that it did much good the first time.”

Temple poked the partially-ajar door with his foot, pushing it open. The two white-smocked figures had their backs to him, leaned intently over the table and Sophia. Without knowing what motivated him, Temple leaped into the room, grasped the nearer figure’s arm, whirled him around. Startled confusion began to alter the man’s coarse features, but his face went slack when Temple’s fist struck his jaw with terrible strength. The man collapsed.

The second man turned, mouthing a stream of what must have been Russian invective. He parried Temple’s quick blow with his left hand, crossing his own right fist to Temple’s face and almost ending the fight as quickly as it had started. Temple went down in a heap and was vaguely aware of the Russian’s booted foot hovering over his face. He reached out, grabbed the boot with both hands, twisted. The man screamed and fell and then they were rolling over and over, striking each other with fists, knees, elbows, gouging, butting, cursing. Temple found the Russian’s throat, closed his hands around it, applied pressure. Fists pounded his face, nails raked him, but slowly he succeeded in throttling the Russian. When Temple got to his feet, trembling, the Russian stared blankly at the ceiling. He would go on staring that way until someone shut his eyes.

Not questioning the incomprehensible, Temple knew he had done what he must. Hardly seeking for the motive he could not find he lifted the unconscious Sophia off the table, slung her long form across his shoulder, plodded with her from the room. Arkalion had said haste. He would hurry.

He next was aware of a spaceship. Remembering no time lag, he simply stood in the ship with Arkalion. And Sophia.

He knew it was a spaceship because he had been in one before and although the sensation of weightlessness was not present, they were in deep space. Stars you never see through an obscuring atmosphere hung suspended in the viewports. Cold-bright, not flickering against the plush blackness of deep space, phalanxes and legions of stars without numbers, in such wild profusion that space actually seemed three dimensional.

“This is a different sort of dream,” said Sophia in English. “I remember. I remember everything. Kit—”

“Hello.” He felt strangely shy, became mildly angry when Arkalion hardly tried to suppress a slight snicker. “Well, that second dream wasn’t our idea,” Temple protested. “Once there, we acted...and—”

“And...” said Sophia.

“And nothing,” Arkalion told them. “You haven’t time. This is a spaceship, not like the slow, bumbling craft your people use to reach Mars or Jupiter.”

“Our people?” Temple demanded. “Not yours?”

“Will you let me finish? Light is a laggard crawler by comparison with the drive propelling this ship. Temple, Sophia, we are leaving your Galaxy altogether.”

“Is that a fact,” said Sophia, her Jupiter-found knowledge telling her they were traveling an unthinkable distance. “For some final contest between us, no doubt, to decide whether the U.S.S.R. or the U.S. represents Earth? Kit, I l—love you, but...”

“But Russia is more important, huh?”

“No. I didn’t say that. All my training has been along those lines, though, and even if I’m aware it is indoctrination, the fact still remains. If your country is truly better, but if I have seen your country only through the eyes of Pravda, how can I... I don’t know, Kit. Let me think.”

“You needn’t,” said Arkalion, smiling. “If the two of you would let me get on with it you’d see this particular train of thought is meaningless, quite meaningless.” Arkalion cleared his throat.

“Strange, but I have much the same problem as Sophia has. My indoctrination was far more subtle though. Far more convincing, based upon eons of propaganda methods. Temple, Sophia, those who initiated the Nowhere Journey for hundreds of worlds of your galaxy did so with a purpose.”

“I know. To decide who gets their vast knowledge.”

“Wrong. To find suitable hosts in a one-way relationship which is hardly symbiosis, really out and out parasitism.”

“What?”

And Sophia: “What are you talking about?”

“The sick, decadent, tired old creatures you consider your superiors. Parasites. They need hosts in order to survive. Their old hosts have been milked dry, have become too highly specialized, are now incapable physically or emotionally of meeting a wide variety of environmental challenges. The Nowhere Journey is to find a suitable new host. They have found one. You of Earth.”

“I don’t understand,” Temple said, remembering the glowing accounts of the ‘superboys’ he had been given by his brother Jason. “I just don’t get it. How can we be duped like that? Wouldn’t someone have figured it out? And if they have all the power everyone says, there isn’t much we can do about it, anyway.”

Arkalion scowled darkly. “Then write Earth’s obituary. You’ll need one.”

“Go ahead,” Sophia told Arkalion. “There’s more you want to say.”

"All right. Temple's thought is correct. They have tremendous power. That is why you could be duped so readily. But their power is not concentrated here. These much-faster-than-light ships are an extreme rarity, for the power-drive no longer exists. Five ships in all, I believe. Hardly enough to invade a planet, even for them. It takes them thousands of years to get here otherwise. Thousands. Just as it took me, when I came to Mars and Earth in the first place."

"What?" cried Temple. "You...."

"I am one of them. Correct. I suppose you would call me a subversive, but I have made up my mind. Parasitism is unsatisfactory, when the Maker got us started on symbiosis. Somewhere along the line, evolution took a wrong turn. We are—monsters."

"What do you look like?" Sophia demanded while Temple stood there shaking his head and muttering to himself.

"You couldn't see me, I am afraid. I was the representative here to see how things were going, and when my people found you of the Earth divided yourselves into two camps they realized they had been considering your abilities in halves. Put together, you are probably the top culture of your galaxy."

"So, we win," said Temple.

"Right and wrong. You lose. Earthmen will become hosts. Know what a back-seat driver is, Temple? You would be a back seat driver in your own body. Thinking, feeling, wanting to make decisions, but unable to. Eating when the parasite wants to, sleeping at his command, fighting, loving, living as he wills it. And perishing when he wants a new garment. Oh, they offer something in return. Their culture, their way of life, their scientific, economic, social system. It's good, too. But not worth it. Did you know that their economic struggle between democratic capitalism and totalitarian communism ended almost half a million years ago? What they have now is a system you couldn't even understand."

"Well," Temple mused, "even if everything you said were true—"

"Don't tell me you don't believe me?"

"If it were true and we wanted to do something about it, what could we do?"

"Now, nothing. Nothing but delay things by striking swiftly and letting fifty centuries of time perform your rearguard action. Destroy the one means your enemy has of reaching Earth within foreseeable time and you have destroyed his power to invade for a hundred centuries. He can still reach Earth, but the same way you journeyed to Nowhere. Ten thousand years of space travel in suspended animation. You saw me that way once, Temple, and wondered. You thought I was dead, but that is another story.

"Anyway, let my people invade your planet, ten thousand years

hence. If Earth takes the right direction, if democracy and free thought and individual enterprise win over totalitarian standardization as I think they will, your people will be more than a match for the decadent parasites who may or may not have sufficient initiative to cross space the slow way and attempt invasion in ten thousand years.”

“Ten thousand?” said Temple.

“Five from Earth to Nowhere. The distance to my home is far greater, but the rate of travel can be increased. Ten thousand years.”

“Tell me,” Temple demanded abruptly, “is this a dream?”

Arkalion smiled. “Yes and no. It is not a dream like the others because I assure you your bodies are not now resting on a pair of identical white tables. Still in the other dreams physical things could happen to you, while now you’ll find you can do things as in a dream. For example, neither one of you knows the intricacies of a spaceship, yet if you are to save your planet, you must know the operation of the most intricate of all space ships, a giant space station.”

“Then we’re not dreaming?” asked Temple.

“I never said that. Consider this sequence of events about half way between the dream stage you have already seen and reality itself. Remember this: you’ll have to work together; you’ll have to function like machines. You will be handling totally alien equipment with only the sort of knowledge which can be played into your brains to guide you.”

Sophia sighed. “Being an American, Kit is too much of an individual to help in such a situation.”

Temple snorted. “Being a cog in a simple, state-wide machine is one thing—orienting yourself in a totally new situation is another.”

“Yes, well—”

“See?” Arkalion cautioned. “See? Already you are arguing, but you must work together completely, with not the slightest conflict between you. As it is, you hardly have a chance.”

“What about you?” said Sophia practically. “Can’t you help?”

Arkalion shook his head. “No. While I’d like to see you come out of this thing on top, I would not like to sacrifice my life for it—which is exactly what I’d do if I remained with you and you lost.

“So, let’s get down to detail. Imagine space being folded, imagine your time sense slowing, imagine a new dimension which negates the need for extensive linear travel, imagine anything you want—but we are in the process of moving nine hundred thousand light years through deep space. There is a great galaxy at that distance, almost a twin of your Milky Way: you call it the Andromeda Nebula. Closer to your own system are the two Magellanic Clouds, so called, something else which you table NGC 6822, and finally the Triangulum Galaxy. All have billions of stars, but none of the stars have life. To find life

outside your galaxy you must seek it across almost a million light years. My people live in Andromeda.

“Guarding the flank of their galaxy and speeding through intergalactic space at many light years per minute is what you might call a space station—but on a scale you’ve never dreamed of. Five of your miles in diameter, it is a fortress of terrible strength, a storehouse of half a million years of weapon development. It has been arranged that the one man running this station—”

“Just one?” Temple asked.

“Yes. You will see why when you get there. It has been arranged that he will leave, ostensibly on a scouting expedition. You see, I am not alone in this venture. At any rate, he will report that the space station has been taken—as, indeed, it will be, by the two of you. The only ships capable of overtaking your station in its flight will be the only ships capable of reaching your galaxy before cultural development gives you a chance to survive. They will attack you. You will destroy them—or be destroyed yourselves. Any questions?”

The whole thing sounded fantastic to Temple. Could the fate of all Earth rest on their shoulders in a totally alien environment? Could they be expected to win? Temple had no reason to doubt the former, as wild as it sounded. As for the latter, all he could do was hope. “Tell me,” he said, “how will we learn the use of all the weapons you claim are at our disposal?”

“Can you answer that for him, Sophia?” Arkalion wanted to know.

“Umm, I think so. The same way I had all sorts of culture crammed into me on Jupiter.”

“Precisely. Only take it from me our refinement is far better, and the amount you have to learn actually is less.”

“What I’d like to know—” Sophia began.

“Forget it. I want some sleep and you’ll learn everything that’s necessary at the space station.”

And after that, ply Arkalion as they would with questions, he slumped down in his chair and rested. Temple could suddenly understand and appreciate. He felt like curling up into a tight little ball himself and sleeping until everything was over, one way or the other.

## CHAPTER X

“It’s all so big! So incredible! We’ll never understand it! Never....”

“Relax, Sophia. Arkalion said—”

“I know what Arkalion said, but we haven’t learned anything yet.”

Hours before, Arkalion had landed them on the space station, a gleaming, five-mile in diameter globe, and had quickly departed. Soon after that they had found themselves in a veritable labyrinth of

tunnels, passageways, vaults. Occasionally they passed a great glowing screen, and always the view of space was the same. Like a magnificent, elongated shield, sparkling with a million million points of light, pale gold, burnished copper, blue of glacial ice and silver white, the Andromeda Galaxy spanned space from upper right to lower left. Off at the lower right hand corner they could see their space station; apparently the viewer itself stood far removed in space, projecting its images here at the globe.

Awed the first time they had seen one of the screens, Temple said, "All the poets who ever wrote a line would have given half their lives to see this as we see it now."

"And all the writers, musicians, artists...."

"Anyone who ever thought creatively, Sophia. How can you say it's breathtaking or anything like that when words weren't ever spoken which can...."

"Let's not go poetic just yet," Sophia admonished him with a smile. "We'd better get squared away here, as the expression goes, before it's too late."

"Yes.... Hello, what's this?" A door irised open for them in a solid wall of metal. Irised was the only word Temple could think of, for a tiny round hole appeared in the wall spreading evenly in all directions with a slow, uniform, almost liquid motion. When it was large enough to walk through, they entered a completely bare room and Temple whirled in time to see the entrance irisng shut.

"Something smells," said Sophia, sniffing at the air.

Sweet and cloying, the odor grew stronger. Temple may have heard a faint hissing sound. "I'm getting sleepy," he said.

Nodding, Sophia ran, banged on the wall where the door had opened so suddenly, then closed. No response. "Is it a trap?"

"By whom? For what?" Temple found it difficult to keep his eyes from closing. "Fight it if you want, Sophia. I'm going to sleep." And he squatted in the center of the floor, staring vacantly at the bare wall.

Just as Temple was drifting off into a dream about complex machinery he did not yet understand but realized he soon would, Sophia joined him the hard way, collapsing alongside of him, unconscious and sprawling gracelessly on the floor.

Temple slept.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Sleepy-head, get up." Sophia stirred as he spoke and shook her. She yawned, stretched, smiled up at him lazily. "How do you feel now?"

"Hungry, Kit."

"That's a point. It's all right now, though. I know exactly where the



food concentrates are kept. Three levels below us, second segment of the wall. You can make those queer doors iris by pressing the wall twice, with about a one second interval.”

They found the food compartment, discovered row on row of cans, boxes, jars. Temple opened one of the cans, gazed in disappointment on a sorry looking thing the size of his thumb. Brown, shriveled, dry and almost flaky, it might have been a bird.

Sophia turned up her nose. “If that’s the best this place has to offer, I’m not so hungry anymore.”

Suddenly, she gaped. So did Temple. A savory odor attracted their attention, steam rising from the small can added to their interest. Amazing things happened to the withered scrap of food on exposure to the air. Temple barely had time to extract it from the can, burning his fingers in the process, when it became twice the can’s size. It grew and by the time it finished, it was as savory looking a five pound fowl as Temple had ever seen. Roasted, steaming hot, ready to eat.

They tore into it with savage gusto.

“Stephanie should see me now,” Temple found himself saying and regretted it.

“Stephanie? Who’s that?”

“A girl.”

“Your girl?”

“What’s the difference. She’s a million light years and fifty centuries away.”

“Answer me.”

“Yes,” said Temple, wishing he could change the subject. “My girl.” He hadn’t thought of Stephanie in a long time, perhaps because it was meaningless to think of someone dead fifty centuries. Now that the thoughts had been stirred within him, though, he found them poignantly pleasant.

“Your girl...and you would marry her if you could?”

He had grown attached to Sophia, not in reality, but in the second of their dream worlds. He wished the memory of the dream had not lingered for it disturbed him. In it he had loved Sophia as much as he now loved Stephanie although the one was obtainable and the other was a five-thousand year pinch of dust. And how much of the dream lingered with him, in his head and his heart?

“Let’s forget about it,” Temple suggested.

“No. If she were here today and if everything were normal, would you marry her?”

“Why talk about what can’t be?”

“I want to know, that’s why.”

“All right. Yes, I would. I would marry Stephanie.”

“Oh,” said Sophia. “Then what happened in the dream meant...”

nothing.”

“We were two different people,” Temple said coolly, then wished he hadn’t for it was only half-true. He remembered everything about the dream—which-was-more-than-a-dream vividly. He had been far more intimate with Sophia, and over a longer period of time, than he had ever been with Stephanie. And even if Stephanie appeared impossibly on the spot and he spent the rest of his life as her husband, still he would never forget his dream-life with Sophia. In time he could let himself tell her that. But not now; now the best thing he could do would be to change the subject.

“I see,” Sophia answered him coldly.

“No, you don’t. Maybe some day you will.”

“There’s nothing but what you told me. I see.”

“No...forget it,” he told her wearily.

“Of course. It was only a dream anyway. The dream before that I almost killed you out of hatred anyway. Love and hate, I guess they neutralize. We’re just a couple of people who have to do a job together, that’s all.”

“For gosh sakes, Sophia! That isn’t true. I loved Stephanie. I still would, were Stephanie alive. But she’s—she’s about as accessible as the Queen of Sheba.”

“So? There’s an American expression—you’re carrying a torch.”

Probably, Temple realized, it was true. But what did all of that have to do with Sophia? If he and Sophia...if they...would it be fair to Sophia? It would be exactly as if a widower remarried, with the memory of his first wife set aside in his heart...no, different, for he had never wed Stephanie, and always in him would be the desire for what had never been.

“Let’s talk about it some other time,” Temple almost pleaded, wanting the respite for himself as much as for Sophia.

“No. We don’t have to talk about it ever. I won’t be second best, Kit. Let’s forget all about it and do our job. I—I’m sorry I brought the whole thing up.”

Temple felt like an unspeakable heel. And, anyway, the whole thing wasn’t resolved in his mind. But they couldn’t just let it go at that, not in case something happened when the ships came and one or both of them perished. Awkwardly, for now he felt self-conscious about everything, he got his arms about Sophia, drew her to him, placed his lips to hers.

That was as far as he got. She wrenched free, shoved clear of him. “If you try that again, you will have another dislocated jaw.”

Temple shrugged wearily. If anything were to be resolved between them, it would be later.

When the ships came moments afterwards—seven, not the five

Arkalion predicted—they were completely unprepared.

Temple spotted them first on one of the viewing screens, half way between the receiver and the space station itself, silhouetted against the elongated shield of Andromeda. They soared out of the picture, appeared again minutes later, zooming in from the other direction in two flights of four ships and three.

“Come on!” Sophia cried over her shoulder, irisng the door and plunging from the room. Temple followed at her heels but her Jupiter trained muscles pushed her lithe legs in long, powerful strides and soon she outdistanced him. By the time he reached the armaments vault, breathless, she was seated at the single gun-emplacement, her fingers on the controls.

“Watch the viewing screen and tell me how we’re doing,” Sophia told him, not taking her eyes from the dials and levers.

Temple watched, fascinated, saw a thin pencil of radiant energy leap out into space, missing one of the ships by what looked like a scant few miles. He called the corrective azimuth to her, hardly surprised by the way his mind had absorbed and now could use its new-found knowledge.

Temple understood and yet did not understand. For example, he knew the station had but one gun and Sophia sat at it now, yet in certain ways it didn’t make sense. Could it cover all sectors of space? His mind supplied the answer although he had not been aware of the knowledge an instant before: yes. The space station did not merely rotate. Its surface was a spherical projection of a moving Moebius strip and although he tried to envision the concept, he failed. The weapon could be fired at any given point in space at twenty second intervals, covering every other conceivable point in the ensuing time.

Sophia was firing again and Temple watched the thin beam leap across space. “Hit!” he roared. “Hit!”

Something flashed at the front end of the lead ship. The light blinded him, but when he could see again only six ships remained in space—casting perfect shadows on the Andromeda Galaxy! The source of light, Temple realized triumphantly, was out of range, but he could picture it—a glowing derelict of a ship, spewing heat, light and radioactivity into the void.

“One down,” Sophia called. “Six to go. I like your American expressions. Like sitting ducks—”

She did not finish. Abruptly, light flared all around them. Something shrieked in Temple’s ears. The vault shuddered, shook. Girders clattered to the floor, stove it in, revealing black rock. Sophia was thrown back from the single gun, crashing against the wall, flipping in air and landing on her stomach.

Temple ran to her, turned her over. Blood smeared her face,

trickled from her lips. Although she did not move, she wasn't dead. Temple half dragged, half carried her from the vault into an adjoining room. He stretched her out comfortably as he could on the floor, ran back into the vault.

Molten metal had collected in one corner of the room, crept sluggishly toward him across the floor, heating it white-hot. He skirted it, climbed over a twisted girder, pushed his way past other debris, found himself at the gun emplacement.

"How dumb can I get?" Temple said aloud. "Sophia ran to the gun, must have assumed I set up the shields." Again, it was an item of information stored in his mind by the wisdom of the space station. Protective shields made it impossible for anything but a direct hit on the emplacement to do them any harm, only Temple had never set the shields in place. He did so now, merely by tripping a series of levers, but glancing at a dial to his left he realized with alarm that the damage possibly had already been done. The needle, which measured lethal radiation, hovered half way between negative and the critical area marked in red and, even as Temple watched it, crept closer to the red.

\* \* \* \*

How much time did he have? Temple could not be sure, bent grimly over the weapon. It was completely unfamiliar to his mind, completely unfamiliar to his fingers. He toyed with it, released a blast of radiant energy, whirled to face the viewing screen. The beam streaked out into the void, clearly hundreds of miles from its objective.

Cursing, Temple tried again, scoring a near miss. The ships were trading a steady stream of fire with him now, but with the shielding up it was harmless, striking and then bouncing back into space. Temple scored his first hit five minutes after sitting down at the gun, whooped triumphantly and fired again. Five ships left.

But the dial indicated an increase in radioactivity as newly created neutrons spread their poison like a cancer. Behind Temple, the vault was a shambles. The pool of molten metal had increased in size, almost cutting off any possibility of escape. He could jump it now, Temple realized, but it might grow larger. Consolidating its gains now, it had sheared a pit in the floor, had commenced vaporizing the rock below it, hissing and lapping with white-hot insistence.

Something boomed, grated, boomed again and Temple watched another girder bounce off the floor, dip one end into the molten pool and clatter out a stub. Apparently the damage was extensive; a structural weakness threatened to make the entire ceiling go.

Temple fired again, got another ship. He could almost feel death

breathing on his shoulder, in no great hurry but sure of its prize. He fired the weapon.

If one ship remained when they could no longer use the gun, they would have failed. One ship might make the difference for Earth. One.

...

Three left. Two.

They raked the space station with blast after blast—futilely. They spun and twisted and streaked by, offering poor targets. Temple waited his chance...and glanced at the dial which measured radioactivity. He yelped, stood up. The needle had encroached upon the red area. Death to remain where he was more than a moment or two. Not quick death, but rather slow and lingering. He could do what he had to, then perish hours later. His life—for Earth? If Arkalion had known all the answers, and if he could get both ships and if there weren't another alternative for the aliens, the parasites.... Temple stabbed out with his pencil beam, caught the sixth ship, then saw the needle dip completely into the red. He got up trembling, stepped back, half tripped on the stump of a girder as his eyes strayed in fascination to the viewing screen. The seventh ship was out of range, hovering off in the void somewhere, awaiting its chance. If Temple left the gun the ship would come in close enough to hit the emplacement despite its protective shielding. Well, it was suicide to remain there—especially when the ship wasn't even in view.

Temple leaped over the molten pool and left the vault.

\* \* \* \*

He found Sophia stirring, sitting up.

"What hit me?" she said, and laughed. "Something seems to have gone wrong, Kit...what...?"

"It's all right now," he told her, lying.

"You look pale."

"You got one. I got five. One ship to go."

"What are you waiting for?" And Sophia sprang to her feet, heading for the vault.

"Hold it!" Temple snapped. "Don't go in there."

"Why not. I'll get the last ship and—"

"*Don't go in there!*" Temple tugged at her arm, pulled her away from the vault and its broken door which would not iris closed any more.

"What's the matter, Kit?"

"I—I want to finish the last one myself, that's all."

Sophia got herself loose, reached the circular doorway, peered inside. "Like Dante's Inferno," she said. "You told me nothing was the matter. Well, we can get through to the emplacement, Kit."

"No." And again he stopped her. At least he had lived in freedom

all his life and although he was still young and did not want to die, Sophia had never known freedom until now and it wouldn't be right if she perished without savoring its fruits. He had a love, dust fifty centuries, he had his past and his memories. Sophia had only the future. Clearly, if someone had to yield life, Temple would do it.

"It's worse than it looks," he told her quietly, drawing her back from the door again. He explained what had happened, told her the radioactivity had not quite reached critical point—which was a lie. "So," he concluded, "we're wasting time. If I rush in there, fire, and rush right out everything will be fine."

"Then let me. I'm quicker than you."

"No. I—I'm more familiar with the gun." Dying would not be too bad, if he went with reasonable certainty he had saved the Earth. No man ever died so importantly, Temple thought briefly, then felt cold fear when he realized it would be dying just the same. He fought it down, said: "I'll be right back."

Sophia looked at him, smiling vaguely. "Then you insist on doing it?"

When he nodded she told him, "Then,—kiss me. Kiss me now, Kit—in case something...."

Fiercely, he swept her to him, bruising her lips with his. "Sophia, Sophia...."

At last, she drew back. "Kit," she said, smiling demurely. She took his right hand in her left, held it, squeezed it. Her own right hand she suddenly brought up from her waist, fist clenched, driving it against his jaw.

Temple fell, half stunned by the blow, at her feet. For the space of a single heartbeat he watched her move slowly toward the round doorway, then he had clambered to his feet, running after her. He got his arms on her shoulders, yanked at her.

When she turned he saw she was crying. "I—I'm sorry, Kit. You couldn't fool me about...Stephanie. You can't fool me about this." She had more leverage this time. She stepped back, bringing her small, hard fist up from her knees. It struck Temple squarely at the point of the jaw, with the strength of Jovian-trained muscle behind it. Temple's feet left the floor and he landed with a thud on his back. His last thought of Sophia—or of anything, for a while—made him smile faintly as he lost consciousness. For a kiss she had promised him another dislocated jaw, and she had kept her promise....

\* \* \* \*

Later, how much later he did not know, something soft cushioned his head. He opened his eyes, stared through swirling, spinning murk. He focused, saw Arkalion. No—two Arkalions standing off at a

distance, watching him. He squirmed, knew his head was cushioned in a woman's lap. He sighed, tried to sit up and failed. Soft hands caressed his forehead, his cheeks. A face swam into vision, but mistily. "Sophia," he murmured. His vision cleared.

It was Stephanie.

\* \* \* \*

"It's over," said Arkalion.

"We're on our way back to Earth, Kit."

"But the ships—"

"All destroyed. If my people want to come here in ten thousand years, let them try. I have a hunch you of Earth will be ready for them."

"It took us five thousand to reach Nowhere," Temple mused. "It will take us five thousand to return. We'll come barely in time to warn Earth—"

"Wrong," said Arkalion. "I still have my ship. We're in it now, so you'll reach Earth with almost fifty centuries to spare. Why don't you forget about it, though? If human progress for the next five thousand years matches what has been happening for the last five, the parasites won't stand a chance."

"Earth—five thousand years in the future," Stephanie said dreamily. "I wonder what it will be like.... Don't be so startled, Kit. I was a pilot study on the Nowhere Journey. If I made it successfully, other women would have been sent. But now there won't be any need."

"I wouldn't be too sure of that," said the real Alaric Arkalion III. "I suspect a lot of people are going to feel just like me. Why not go out and colonize space. We can do it. Wonderful to have a frontier again. ... Why, a dozen billionaires will appear for every one like my father. Good for the economy."

"So, if we don't like Earth," said Stephanie, "we can always go out."

"I have a strong suspicion you will like it," said Arkalion's double.

Alaric III grinned. "What about you, bud? I don't want a twin brother hanging around all the time."

Arkalion grinned back at him. "What do you want me to do, young man? I've forsaken my people. This is now my body. Tell you what, I promise to be always on a different continent. Earth isn't so small that I'll get in your hair."

Temple sat up, felt the bandages on his jaw. He smiled at Stephanie, told her he loved her and meant it. It was exactly as if she had returned from the grave and in his first exultation he hadn't even thought of Sophia, who had perished all alone in the depths of space that a world might live....

He turned to Arkalion. "Sophia?"

"We found her dead, Kit. But smiling, as if everything was worth it."

"It should have been me."

"Whoever Sophia was," said Stephanie, "she must have been a wonderful woman, because when you got up, when you came to, her name was...."

"Forget it," said Temple. "Sophia and I have a very strange relationship and...."

"All right, you said forget it. Forget it." Stephanie smiled down at him. "I love you so much there isn't even room for jealousy.... Ummm...Kit...."

"Break up that clinch," ordered Arkalion. "We're making one more stop at Nowhere to pick up anyone who wants to return to Earth. Some of 'em probably won't but those who do are welcome...."

"Jason will stay," Temple predicted. "He'll be a leader out among the stars."

"Then he'll have to climb over my back," Alaric III predicted happily, his eyes on the viewport hungrily.

Temple's jaw throbbed. He was tired and sleepy. But satisfied. Sophia had died and for that he was sad, but there would always be a place deep in his heart for the memory of her: delicious, somehow exotic, not a love the way Stephanie was, not as tender, not as sure... but a feeling for Sophia that was completely unique. And whenever the strangeness of the far-future Earth frightened Temple, whenever he felt a situation might get the better of him, whenever doubt clouded judgment, he would remember the tall lithe girl who had walked to her death that a world might have the freedom she barely had tasted. And together with Stephanie he would be able to do anything.

Unless, he thought dreamily as he drifted off to sleep, his head pillowed again on Stephanie's lap, he'd wind up with a bum jaw the rest of his life.

#### AUTHOR'S NOTE

Milton Lesser started reading science-fiction in 1939, and began writing it in 1949. Since then he has had a myriad stories and novels published under many pen-names. Of this novel, he writes:

"Along with a lot of other people, I like to write about the first interstellar voyage. The reason is simple. Once mankind gets out to the stars and begins to spread out across the galaxy, he'll be immortal despite his best—make that *worst*—efforts to destroy himself. You can destroy a world, maybe a dozen



worlds, but spread humanity out thin among the stars, colonies here, there, and all over, and he's immortal. He'll live as long as there's a universe to hold him.

"I know interstellar travel is a long way off, but science has a way of leaping ahead in geometric, not arithmetic progression. A hundred years? Perhaps we'll have our first starship then. Let's hope so. For if man can survive the next hundred years—the hardest hundred, I believe—he'll reach the stars and go on forever."

# A HUSBAND FOR MY WIFE, by William W. Stuart

Originally published in *Galaxy Magazine*, August 1960.

Soon, very soon now, the time will come for me to meet my wife's husband. I can hardly wait. Every dog has his day and Professor Thurlow Benjamin has just about had it. Every day has its dog, too, and I am going to return to him with full five years' interest the bad time he gave to me. The dog.

Dog? Look, he stole my girl not once but twice. The second time he, you might say, took his time to beat my time—and left me behind to the bad time that belonged to him. Benji is—or he was and he will be—a scientifically sneaky, two-timing dog, and a dog's life is what he gave me. But now, after nearly five years, time is on my side. He will get what, minute by minute, is coming to him not soon enough, but soon.

Benji—Professor Thurlow Benjamin—was my oldest, closest friend. I was his. We hated each other dearly in the way that only two boyhood pals can and by chance or mischance that quality of bitter-friendly, boyish rivalry never left our relationship. Why? A woman, naturally.

The first time we met, he was a tall, gangling, red-headed, big-nosed kid of nine. I, Bull (for Boulard) Benton, was shorter, stockier, heavier. Maybe not handsome exactly, but clean cut, very clean cut. Benji knocked a chip off my shoulder and I knocked his block off, but not without collecting a few lumps doing it. From then on, we fought together against anyone else. When no one else was handy, we fought each other. And naturally we each wanted what the other had.

After high school, we roomed together at Burnington University right there in our home town, Belt City. Benji was a brain, a scholar. I was an athlete. So he broke nearly every bone in his body trying to be a six-foot-three, one-hundred-and-thirty-nine-pound scatback, while I nearly sprained a brain that was deep, definitely deep, but maybe not quite as quick on its feet as some, trying for scholarship.

The last year and a half at the university, the competition between us narrowed down to a battle for Vera Milston, old Dean Milston's statuesque daughter. That was all a mistake. I can see it now. So can Benji. But not then.

\* \* \* \*

Dean Milston was the dourest, sourest, meanest old tyrant ever to

suspend a football captain for a couple of unimportant “D”s. One afternoon in junior year at basketball practice—Benji was out, dragging around a cast—Jocko Bunter bet me ten I didn’t have the nerve to date the dean’s daughter. Well, hell, I’d seen her around, visiting the dean as regularly as I had to. She was a lot of girl. Tall, honey-blond—a little on the regal, commanding side, and maybe her lips were a mite set over a chin that the old man should have kept to himself—but there are times when a young man doesn’t analyze the details as carefully as he might. She was built like nothing I had tackled all fall.

So I took a chance, got a date, won ten, and that might and should have been that. She had a way of saying “No!” that made me think of her father. But, the thing was, Benji didn’t know about the bet. I dated her once. So he had to date her twice. Again, I didn’t analyze. I jumped to the conclusion Benji had the hots for her and went to work to cut him out.

That kept us busy the next year and a half and I led all the way. Vera and I got engaged at the spring prom to be married right after my graduation—which improved the odds on my graduating considerably. The dean was a grim old devil who considered Hamlet a comedy and could refuse anything to anyone—except Vera, and how could I have known it was fear rather than affection that made him give in to her?

Anyway, perhaps the strain of passing me a diploma was too great. The next day the old devil passed on himself, and no matter where he may be sitting, I know he is happy as long as he can watch the others fry. But I shouldn’t grumble. He saved me, unintentional though it was.

Vera, possibly having second thoughts as she looked over the Dean’s List, said she couldn’t marry me till after a reasonable period of mourning. The Army took me and rejected Benji. He stayed on for post-graduate study in physics. I told you he was a brain.

A brain, but not equally acute in all fields. When I got back to Belt City three years later, Benji was already an assistant professor of physics—and Vera’s husband. They were settled in the old dean’s big, ancient house just off the campus and Benji was aiming—or being aimed—at a distinguished academic career. I came back to town with the idea of winding up the family insurance and real estate business and pulling out, mostly to keep away from them.

It wasn’t, you understand, that I was carrying such a heavy torch for Vera. She hadn’t blighted my life; not then, that is. But it seemed to me that living in town with her and Professor Thurlow Benjamin—a gloating, triumphant Benji, laughing at me because he’d succeeded in marrying my girl—would be a real annoyance. But, of course, when I

hit town I had to call them and they had to invite me to dinner.

For one time, anyway, I figured I had to accept. I gritted my teeth and went. I never had a sweeter, more enjoyable evening in all my life.

\* \* \* \*

I got there about seven in the evening and walked up the steps to the big old porch on the dean's house feeling a bit nervous and upset. I'd walked up those same steps often enough before, feeling nervous and upset, but this was different. I lifted the oversized brass knocker and rapped. Vera's voice, coming from the back of the house someplace, cut through the evening air. "Thurlow! Answer the door!"

"Yes, sweets. I'm on my way, Vera hun bun." That was Benji. Hun bun, yet! And his voice was misery. It cringed and whined. I grinned to myself and began to feel more cheerful.

Benji let me in. His glasses were thicker and his hair thinner and he looked a lot older. But it was Benji, the same old lanky, gangling redhead; yet not the same, too. He had a hang-dog look that was new and suddenly I felt so good, I punched him playfully in the ribs. He winced—and didn't even counter. If the fight hadn't gone out of him, it had sure been watered down. We went on in to the parlor across the hall from the dean's old study. Vera joined us. She didn't look bad—at a glance. But if you checked right close, and I did, there was something in her look—a sharpness I hadn't noticed before; her nose seemed bigger, beak-like; the broad, solid shoulders; deep-down grooves at the corners of her mouth.

She threw her arms around me and kissed me. My temperature stayed steady and cool.

"Boulard! Boulard, darling! You look marvelous!"

I felt great, too. "Vera, girl. You're as gorgeous as ever, radiant, blooming, still the campus goddess. And Mrs. Thurlow Benjamin now, hm-m? Old Benji is sure a lucky dog."

Benji forced a hollow laugh. Vera smiled a positive agreement.

Then Benji sort of coughed out a faint note of hope and pleaded, "Vera, sweet, this is a—uh—an occasion, don't you agree, dear? Don't you—ah—do you think maybe I ought to—fix us all a drink?"

"Thurlow! You drink far too much! You had a highball before dinner at Professor Dorman's only night before last."

Almost—but not quite—I felt sorry for him.

"Ah, well, Vera doll," I said, "this is an occasion, after all. And I do want to drink a toast to you and Benji."

"Hmph."

"Especially you, the love of my life, lost now, but lovelier than ever."

“Boulard!... Well, Thurlow, don’t stand there like an idiot. Go mix us some drinks. And mind the line on the bottle.”

And then she turned back with some more gush for me. I enjoyed it, knowing now what I had been saved from. In fact, as I said, I enjoyed the whole evening; my playing up to Vera made her just that much rougher on Benji. Revenge on Benji plus relief at what I had escaped made life seem pleasant, and right there and then I changed my mind about leaving town. I decided to stay and settled down.

\* \* \* \*

Well, I did settle, but not too far down. Instead of selling out Uncle George’s insurance and real estate firm, I went to work in it. It was prosperous enough and light work. There were plenty of girls around town if you got around, and I did.

Looking back, those were the happy years. Naturally I kept seeing quite a bit of Vera and Benji. Rubbing it in? Sure, why not? Hell, half the pleasure in any success comes from giving a hard time to those who gave you a hard time. It may not be nice, but it is normal.

I lolled in the shade and laughed; Benji sweated and suffered. His boss’s whip cracked merrily. He plodded ahead in the University Physics Department and fiddled around his lab whenever he could escape into it.

Then there came a black Friday evening in early autumn. I was due at Benji’s for dinner, just him and me. Vera had gone up to Chicago that morning to see her ever-dying Aunt Bella and do some shopping. She would not be back till the next day so she called on me to keep an eye on Benji.

So I was due for a quietly pleasant early evening listening to Benji talk about his sorrows. Then, I figured, Benji would go to his lab in the old dean’s study and I would go out on the town. I had a date, one of the very best, Starlight Glowe, formerly Daisy Hanzel, formerly an office clerk. She was a pert little strawberry blonde, cute, with a lot of good humor and a lot of everything else too; about as unlike Vera as a girl could be. That week she was between nightclub engagements, back in her old home town. And back in the old groove with me, too. I looked forward to the evening—first Benji’s troubles and then my own pleasures.

I pulled up in front of Benji’s old place just at dusk. A late working lineman from Beltsville Power was fiddling around on the pole outside Benji’s lab room. “Hey, Mac,” he hollered, “you going in there? Look, tell the prof they’ll cut it in at seven ayem, huh? Can’t make it a minute sooner.”

I nodded as I went up the steps and across the porch; knocked once. Walked on in—and stopped dead in the hallway to stare up the stairs.

It was Benji, but not the Vera's Benji I was used to. He was dressed in the evening clothes Vera got him to wear only at major faculty functions. He carried a cane, wore a flower. Tonight he was Benji, man about town, knight of the evening. Sharp. Cool. Cocky.

He strutted on down the stairs and past me. He winked, grinned that dirty, sneaky grin of his I remembered all too well from the old days. At the door, he looked back over his shoulder, still grinning, and said, "Stick around a minute, Bull boy. I have something to show you." The door slammed shut.

\* \* \* \*

I couldn't believe it; he wouldn't dare. Then I heard my car, my new sport car, starting outside and I swore, grabbing the doorknob.

"Wait, Bull. You couldn't catch me."

I spun around. Damned if it wasn't old Benji, coming down the stairs again just as though it wasn't impossible. This time he looked himself, but worse. He had on an old lab smock and a new hangover. He looked awful—but with a hint of satisfaction too, like remembering the time he'd had getting into such lousy shape.

"Well, Bull boy," he mumbled, wavering on down the steps, holding the top of his head on with one hand, "come on out in the lab. Maybe we could find a little nip. And I have something to show you."

"So you said."

"Eh? Oh, yes, so I did. Last night, when I was going out."

"It was just now—only you went out all dressed up, and here you are all beat up. What's this all about?"

"Come on," he said with a flash of temper. "When I get a hair or two of the dog, I'll explain it to you."

I followed him into his lab, the dean's old study. It was the only thing Benji could call his own. Vera let him have it on the off-chance that he might find something important enough to give their social and financial position a boost.

In the lab, Benji fished an amber-filled flask from the wastebasket under the old rolltop desk and poured himself a double, me a single, in a couple of big test tubes. I only half saw him out of a corner of the eye.

What I was really looking at was a damned peculiar rig that filled up about a third of the space along the side wall next to the kitchen. It was—I couldn't figure it. It looked something like one of those jungle gym outfits in the kids' playgrounds. But there were wires running from it to half a dozen wall plugs, and a seat up in the middle with a bunch of dials and things.

It was all odd, and oddest was the way it all sort of shimmered and blurred as I watched it.

“What in hell is that?” I walked across the lab toward it, reaching out.

“Better not touch it, Bull. You might knock something out.”

Since he put it like that, I raised my hand to grab hold of one of the cross bars by the seat in the center of the thing—and there I was resting comfortably on a small cloud in far outer space, watching a great spiral nebula whirling in infinite majesty through the vast, empty blackness, and I thought about the mystery of the universe. I felt that if I could just reach out, I would have in my grasp the final answer. But then it drifted away and the nebula slowly narrowed and evolved into a great system of suns, planets, moons—and finally into the big, old chandelier in the dean’s study.

\* \* \* \* \*

When it all seemed to stabilize at that point, I sat up a little shakily. The room, Benji’s lab now, was still there. I stood up and felt lousy. My head ached. I looked around. Benji was sitting at the desk slumped over, his head on his folded arms. The flask of whiskey, half gone, was on the desk beside him. I emptied it out a little more, into me, and checked my watch. Six o’clock and the sky showed gray outside. I had been out all night.

I put my foot on the base of Benji’s swivel chair and shoved hard. The chair rolled back, out from under him. He slumped down with a pleasing thud on the floor. He woke up with a pained expression that helped my headache a little.

“Damn you, Benji,” I said, “you did that out of spite, to break my date with Daisy, I bet.”

He yawned. “I told you you’d better not touch it.”

“Because you knew then I’d have to go ahead and do it. It’s a wonder, with me knocked out, you didn’t go try to steal my girl.”

“I did. I am.”

“You what?”

“I did go out with Daisy. I am with her now.”

“Are you cracked? You are right here with me.”

“True, but I am simultaneously with Daisy.” He grinned reflectively. “And I don’t mind saying Daisy is much better company than you.... Now wait, Bull. I know this is difficult for you to grasp, but it is a fact that I am in two places at the same time—only on different circuits. This is big, Bull, really big! After you help me with one or two details, I am going to share it with you. Listen to me.”

Sometimes I can be sickeningly gullible. “All right. Start explaining.”

“Think, Bull! Last night you saw me go out the front door. At substantially the same time, you also saw me, dressed quite

differently, come down the hall stairs. It should be obvious. I have built a time machine."

I looked down at my watch and then back at him, with raised eyebrows.

"No, Bull. Not a machine for telling time; a machine for traveling through time or, actually, more or less around it. You see my machine there."

The jungle gym rig was still at the side of the room, blurred and shimmering. "Yeah, I see it. And don't bother telling me not to touch it again. I won't."

"Your own fault. Ordinarily you could touch even one of the bars; it is perfectly safe. But just now the machine is there twice. That creates further static force fields."

"Benji—"

"Look at it. Looks as though you were seeing double, hm-m? And you are. You see, Bull, this coming morning at ten to seven, I took—and will take—the machine and I traveled back to ten to five yesterday afternoon. At that time the machine was already there. Actually, I should have moved it just before I used it this morning, to limit the overlaps. But I was rushed. You'll see. Daisy and I will be here shortly." He grinned. It was an expression I had never particularly cared for. "Have another drink, Bull."

That was an expression I liked better. I did have one. His story was unbelievable. But I was beginning to believe it—partly because of the machine there and the fact that I had seen two of him practically at once the evening before, partly because I knew Benji would be capable of almost anything if it would let him steal a girl from me and get away from Vera besides.

\* \* \* \* \*

He took a short nip himself and went on. "I won't strain your limited facilities by trying to give you the technical side of it. More or less, it is a matter of setting up the proper number of counteracting magnetic force fields, properly focused, in a proper relationship each with the other to bend the normal space factors in such a way as to circumvent time. Is that clear?"

"Not to me," I said. "Is it to you?"

"Not altogether. But what is clear is this. My machine works. I can jump through time. To any time."

"Got any special messages from Cleopatra?"

"The amount or period of time is a question of power. With only the regular house current I have connected now, about a day at a step is the limit. That is as far as I have gone. Of course I could go one day and then another and then another, forward or back, indefinitely.



With more current, there would be no such limitations.”

“How about taking a run up to the end of the week and let me know how the World Series is going to come out?”

“Ah, now you begin to see! I told you this is a big thing—tremendous! And all I ask is just a little help from you, and you will share in the proceeds.”

“What, me help? How?”

“I had the power company run in a special power line yesterday. It will cut in this morning at seven. With this added power, the machine can travel five years. Five years at a jump, which as far as I—we, that is—want to go.”

“Well, just suppose what you say is true, Benji. If it is, then you used your sneaky machine to two-time me with Daisy last night, eh? I like that. Vera will like that, too. But you expect to bribe me with a share in your rig to help you out. How? With what?”

“Bull, it’s like this. I did go out last night, my first time in a long time. You know Vera. So, considering the past few years, you can understand that I was—uh—maybe a bit reckless last night, ran into a few little problems. Nothing serious, of course. And besides, with your help, the police won’t be able—”

“The police?”

“Yes. But, Bull, you’ve been right here with me all night. You can swear to that. So I couldn’t possibly have driven your car up the steps and through the glass doors into the ancient history section of the museum.”

“My car!”

“Now, Bull, we’ll make money—you can get *lots* of cars. And I didn’t mean to smash up yours. I simply wanted to give Daisy a rough idea of a time trip back into the past. But you can tell the police I was right here when someone broke out through the window by the Neanderthal exhibit while the police were coming in the front door after us. So someone else must have driven off in the police car.”

“You stole the police car?” I yelped.

\* \* \* \*

“Oh, we won’t keep it,” he said airily. “But perhaps they are upset about our borrowing it and about the duet of ‘As Time Goes By’ that Daisy and I sang over the police radio.”

“Lord! And when did you finish all this fun and games?” I demanded.

“When? Let’s see. It’s 6:40 A.M. So we—Daisy and I—are on our way back here now. In the patrol car.”

“Now? You and Daisy? In the patrol car?”

“The one we borrowed. The police—they seem to have a lot of cars

—are not far behind. I believe they think they recognized me. You can tell them how wrong they are.”

He stopped to listen. I heard it too, a sound of sirens in the distance, coming closer.

“So, Benji. In a minute or so, you—a second edition of you, when one has always been plenty—you are coming here, with all the cops in town on your tail, *and* with my girl. And you expect me to step forward and, lying in my teeth, tell these enraged cops that you are innocent. This is quite a request, Benji.”

There was the roar of a car racing down the quiet, Saturday-dawn street. Benji looked at me anxiously. “Here we come. Bull, please! You wouldn’t turn me over to the police. Would you?”

No, I didn’t want the cops to get him. I wanted to get him myself—and let Vera finish him.

There was a sound of running footsteps up the porch stairs. The hallway door opened. Arm in arm, laughing like a pair of idiots, in came Benji—Benji II—and my girl, Daisy. They staggered across the room. Benji II threw his arms around Daisy and kissed her with conviction and assurance. Then, quickly, he stepped away from her and walked over to the time-machine rig.

“Hurry it up,” said the first Benji, “quick. The power will cut off any second now, until they switch in the new line.”

Drunk or not, Benji II knew what he was doing. He dragged the straight chair by the wall to the side of the machine and climbed it. He swayed, almost fell. Then, without touching any of the bars, he managed to step from the chair into the seat of the machine rig. He fiddled with a dial or knob—and vanished. The double exposure look of the machine disappeared too.

“Benji,” said Daisy, staring blankly at the machine.

“Daisy,” said the leftover Benji, walking toward her. The sound of sirens outside sounded loud and louder—and then moaned to a stop in front of the house.

“Benji,” Daisy said again, giving me and the sirens about as much attention as an individual ant gets at a family picnic, “Benji, it was *true* then! All that you were telling me about going through time was true! And we can—”

“Of course, sweet. I told you I’d be with you, that everything will be all right, with good old Bull to help us. What time have you, Bull?”

“Hah?” I was dazed.

“The time? What time is it?”

“It’s just about seven. But—”

Heavy footsteps pounded up the front stairs and across the porch. The front door knocker thundered.

“Bull,” said Benji, “Bull, old friend. I think there may be someone at

the door. Would you see who it is?"

\* \* \* \*

I don't know why I didn't make him go answer. I still don't know. But I walked out into the hall from the lab and opened the front door—and nearly got trampled by a squad of four cops, headed by big, tough Sergeant Winesap. There were, I saw through the open door, two squad cars parked out front and another coming down the block, just behind a taxi.

"Oh," said Winesap, "it's you, Benton. Say, you weren't in this crime wave, too, were you? We only saw two, that madman friend of yours, Professor Benjamin, and the girl, in your car.... Look, you know what they did? They knocked off three hydrants whooping about time and the fountain of youth, and wrecked the museum; and the police car—and what they did to Officer Durlin.... Maybe you weren't in on it, Benton, but we know they came in here. Friend or no friend, don't try to obstruct justice. Where are they?"

"Yes, officer?" inquired Benji, bland as could be, from the lab door. "What seems to be the trouble? Did you wish to see me?"

His manner must have been disarming. At least they didn't shoot him on the spot. They just advanced, loosening guns in holsters, like a thoughtful lynching party. Benji strolled back into the lab and over to Daisy, who was standing by the machine at the side of the room.

The officers were confused. Benji, sober or nearly so, in his old lab smock, looked a good deal different to them from the wild man they'd been chasing all over town. But there was Daisy in her evening gown.

"That's them, all right," said a young rookie with a fine-blooming shiner. "She's the one that threw the eggplants. I'd know her anywhere."

"And that's Benjamin," said Winesap, grimly. "Okay, both of you, don't try to run. Come along and no more nonsense."

Benji held up one hand—and slipped the other arm around Daisy's waist. "Gentlemen, please! I have no idea what this is about. But surely it can have nothing to do with me. Mr. Benton and I have been right here in my laboratory all night, working. He can verify that."

They looked at me. I opened my mouth. I didn't say a word.

Vera did. She stood there in the doorway. It must have been her in the cab, coming back bright and early from Chicago. She took in the whole scene. Benji. Daisy. Police. Me.

"Benji!!!" she said. You couldn't imagine what she put into that one word.

Everyone turned then to look at her. Slowly and with infinite menace, she started across the room.

"Now, dear," said Benji nervously, "now, sweet, take it easy. This is

only a little experiment. Not what you are thinking at all.”

We swung back toward Benji. He had boosted Daisy onto the seat of his time rig and swung up beside her. Vera yelled and started to run toward them.

Benji twisted a knob and grinned. “Good-by now,” he said. And they were gone.

Benji was gone again. Daisy was gone. The whole rig was gone.

\* \* \* \*

Vera, looking a little forlorn and foolish, ended up her dash stumbling into the empty space where the thing had been. I expect we all looked a little foolish, standing there, gaping. But I had to carry foolishness to the ultimate of idiocy.

Vera at that single moment seemed sort of sad and helpless. And, Lord knows, I was mixed up. I walked over and put an arm around Vera, saying, “There, there, Vera, hon. It’s all right. I’m here.”

I should never have called her attention to it. There I was—and, the hell of it was I had kept playing up to her all this time just to needle Benji. When, that morning, I put my arm around her, I never had a chance.

I was married. To Vera. I still am. It has been a long, long time. Almost five years by the calendar, centuries by subjective time.

I am Vera’s husband, sitting by the light of a kerosene lamp in Dean Milston’s old study, which had been Benji’s lab, writing. Benji and Daisy got away and I got caught. But now I can smile about it. Now, after nearly five years.

You understand?

With the power he got into his machine from the new power line, he said he could go just five years at a jump. Of course, away from Vera. Probably he figured on going further, that he would go the power limit of five years, stop, and then jump again, and again, far enough for complete safety.

But I have had a lot more time to figure than he did. I am figuring on a little party; a little reception in honor of our first intrepid time traveler. A surprise party.

It will be five years to the hour since Daisy and Benji left. Benji will be the surprise, since only I know that he will pop up in our midst. It will surprise Benji. It will surprise Vera—and our guests, among whom I have included Sergeant (Captain now) Winesap and the others of his squad.

Eccentric, a party like that? I suppose. But, to Vera and the others, it is a breakfast anniversary party—the anniversary of the very moment of our engagement. Vera is flattered enough to be tolerant and even pleased at this romantic notion. And, since I know I have

only one out and that it is coming, I am a dutiful—cringing and servile, that is—husband. So Vera indulges me in a harmless eccentricity or two.

My other little eccentricity is electric power—I don't favor it. I use Benji's lab, the old dean's study, as my den. I claim to be writing a historical novel. I need realism, atmosphere. I have had all electric power lines removed from that entire section of the house. There is no power. None.

That's why I'm writing by lamplight.

Our anniversary party will be here. The lamps and candles and the dawn of a bright new day will be light enough when, to the total astonishment of Vera and our guests, Benji and Daisy and the time rig suddenly appear among us. I will greet them with enthusiasm—but this will be as nothing to the greeting they will get from other sources. Benji will work his dials and controls, frantically. Nothing will happen. No power.

Vera will step forward. The hell with whether the statute of limitations may or may not have run out on Benji's assorted legal crimes and misdemeanors. The wrath of Vera accepts no limitations.

Benji will have run out of time and it will be my time then.

# THE SIX FINGERS OF TIME, by R. A. Lafferty

Originally published in *If*, September 1960.

He began by breaking things that morning. He broke the glass of water on his night stand. He knocked it crazily against the opposite wall and shattered it. Yet it shattered slowly. This would have surprised him if he had been fully awake, for he had only reached out sleepily for it.

Nor had he wakened regularly to his alarm; he had wakened to a weird, slow, low booming, yet the clock said six, time for the alarm. And the low boom, when it came again, seemed to come from the clock.

He reached out and touched it gently, but it floated off the stand at his touch and bounced around slowly on the floor. And when he picked it up again it had stopped, nor would shaking start it.

He checked the electric clock in the kitchen. This also said six o'clock, but the sweep hand did not move. In his living room the radio clock said six, but the second hand seemed stationary.

"But the lights in both rooms work," said Vincent. "How are the clocks stopped? Are they on a separate circuit?"

He went back to his bedroom and got his wristwatch. It also said six; and its sweep hand did not sweep.

"Now this could get silly. What is it that would stop both mechanical and electrical clocks?"

He went to the window and looked out at the clock on the Mutual Insurance Building. It said six o'clock, and the second hand did not move.

"Well, it is possible that the confusion is not limited to myself. I once heard the fanciful theory that a cold shower will clear the mind. For me it never has, but I will try it. I can always use cleanliness for an excuse."

The shower didn't work. Yes, it did: the water came now, but not like water; like very slow syrup that hung in the air. He reached up to touch it there hanging down and stretching. And it shattered like glass when he touched it and drifted in fantastic slow globs across the room. But it had the feel of water, wet and pleasantly cool. And in a quarter of a minute or so it was down over his shoulders and back, and he luxuriated in it. He let it soak his head and it cleared his wits at once.

"There is not a thing wrong with me. I am fine. It is not my fault

that the water is slow this morning and other things awry.”

He reached for the towel and it tore to pieces in his hands like porous wet paper.

Now he became very careful in the way he handled things. Slowly, tenderly, and deftly he took them so that they would not break. He shaved himself without mishap in spite of the slow water in the lavatory also.

Then he dressed himself with the greatest caution and cunning, breaking nothing except his shoe laces, a thing that is likely to happen at any time.

“If there is nothing the matter with me, then I will check and see if there is anything seriously wrong with the world. The dawn was fairly along when I looked out, as it should have been. Approximately twenty minutes have passed; it is a clear morning; the sun should now have hit the top several stories of the Insurance Building.”

But it had not. It was a clear morning, but the dawn had not brightened at all in the twenty minutes. And that big clock still said six. It had not changed.

Yet it had changed, and he knew it with a queer feeling. He pictured it as it had been before. The hour and the minute hand had not moved noticeably. But the second hand had moved. It had moved a third of the dial.

So he pulled up a chair to the window and watched it. He realized that, though he could not see it move, yet it did make progress. He watched it for perhaps five minutes. It moved through a space of perhaps five seconds.

“Well, that is not my problem. It is that of the clock maker, either a terrestrial or a celestial one.”

But he left his rooms without a good breakfast, and he left them very early. How did he know that it was early since there was something wrong with the time? Well, it was early at least according to the sun and according to the clocks, neither of which institutions seemed to be working properly.

He left without a good breakfast because the coffee would not make and the bacon would not fry. And in plain point of fact the fire would not heat. The gas flame came from the pilot light like a slowly spreading stream or an unfolding flower. Then it burned far too steadily. The skillet remained cold when placed over it; nor would water even heat. It had taken at least five minutes to get the water out of the faucet in the first place.

He ate a few pieces of leftover bread and some scraps of meat.

In the street there was no motion, no real motion. A truck, first seeming at rest, moved very slowly. There was no gear in which it could move so slowly. And there was a taxi which crept along, but

Charles Vincent had to look at it carefully for some time to be sure that it was in motion. Then he received a shock. He realized by the early morning light that the driver of it was dead. Dead with his eyes wide open!

Slowly as it was going, and by whatever means it was moving, it should really be stopped. He walked over to it, opened the door, and pulled on the brake. Then he looked into the eyes of the dead man. Was he really dead? It was hard to be sure. He felt warm. But, even as Vincent looked, the eyes of the dead man had begun to close. And close they did and open again in a matter of about twenty seconds.

This was weird. The slowly closing and opening eyes sent a chill through Vincent. And the dead man had begun to lean forward in his seat. Vincent put a hand in the middle of the man's chest to hold him upright, but he found the forward pressure as relentless as it was slow. He was unable to keep the dead man up.

So he let him go, watching curiously; and in a few seconds the driver's face was against the wheel. But it was almost as if it had no intention of stopping there. It pressed into the wheel with dogged force. He would surely break his face. Vincent took several holds on the dead man and counteracted the pressure somewhat. Yet the face was being damaged, and if things were normal, blood would have flowed.

The man had been dead so long however, that (though he was still warm) his blood must have congealed, for it was fully two minutes before it began to ooze.

"Whatever I have done, I have done enough damage," said Vincent. "And, in whatever nightmare I am in, I am likely to do further harm if I meddle more. I had better leave it alone."

He walked on down the morning street. Yet whatever vehicles he saw were moving with an incredible slowness, as though driven by some fantastic gear reduction. And there were people here and there frozen solid. It was a chilly morning, but it was not that cold. They were immobile in positions of motion, as though they were playing the children's game of Statues.

"How is it," said Charles Vincent, "that this young girl (who I believe works across the street from us) should have died standing up and in full stride? But, no. She is not dead. Or, if so, she died with a very alert expression. And—oh, my God, she's doing it too!"

For he realized that the eyes of the girl were closing, and in the space of no more than a quarter of a second they had completed their cycle and were open again. Also, and this was even stranger, she had moved, moved forward in full stride. He would have timed her if he could, but how could he when all the clocks were crazy? Yet she must have been taking about two steps a minute.



He went into the cafeteria. The early morning crowd that he had often watched through the windows was there. The girl who made flapjacks in the window had just flipped one and it hung in the air. Then it floated over as if caught by a slight breeze, and sank slowly down as if settling in water.

The breakfasters, like the people in the street, were all dead in this new way, moving with almost imperceptible motion. And all had apparently died in the act of drinking coffee, eating eggs, or munching toast. And if there were only time enough, there was even a chance that they would get the drinking, eating, and munching done with, for there was the shadow of movement in them all.

The cashier had the register drawer open and money in her hand, and the hand of the customer was outstretched for it. In time, somewhere in the new leisurely time, the hands would come together and the change be given. And so it happened. It may have been a minute and a half, or two minutes, or two and a half. It is always hard to judge time, and now it had become all but impossible.

"I am still hungry," said Charles Vincent, "but it would be foolhardy to wait for service here. Should I help myself? They will not mind if they are dead. And if they are not dead, in any case it seems that I am invisible to them."

He wolfed several rolls. He opened a bottle of milk and held it upside down over his glass while he ate another roll. Liquids had all become perversely slow.

But he felt better for his erratic breakfast. He would have paid for it, but how?

He left the cafeteria and walked about the town as it seemed still to be quite early, though one could depend on neither sun nor clock for the time any more. The traffic lights were unchanging. He sat for a long time in a little park and watched the town and the big clock in the Commerce Building tower; but like all the clocks it was either stopped or the hand would creep too slowly to be seen.

It must have been just about an hour till the traffic lights changed, but change they did at last. By picking a point on the building across the street and watching what moved past it, he found that the traffic did indeed move. In a minute or so, the entire length of a car would pass the given point.

He had, he recalled, been very far behind in his work and it had been worrying him. He decided to go to the office, early as it was or seemed to be.

He let himself in. Nobody else was there. He resolved not to look at the clock and to be very careful of the way he handled all objects because of his new propensity for breaking things. This considered, all seemed normal there. He had said the day before that he could hardly

catch up on his work if he put in two days solid. He now resolved at least to work steadily until something happened, whatever it was.

For hour after hour he worked on his tabulations and reports. Nobody else had arrived. Could something be wrong? Certainly something was wrong. But this was not a holiday. That was not it.

Just how long can a stubborn and mystified man plug away at his task? It was hour after hour after hour. He did not become hungry nor particularly tired. And he did get through a lot of work.

"It must be half done. However it has happened, I have caught up on at least a day's work. I will keep on."

He must have continued silently for another eight or ten hours.

He was caught up completely on his back work.

"Well, to some extent I can work into the future. I can head up and carry over. I can put in everything but the figures of the field reports."

And he did so.

"It will be hard to bury me in work again. I could almost coast for a day. I don't even know what day it is, but I must have worked twenty hours straight through and nobody has arrived. Perhaps nobody ever will arrive. If they are moving with the speed of the people in the nightmare outside, it is no wonder they have not arrived."

He put his head down on his arms on the desk. The last thing he saw before he closed his eyes was the misshapen left thumb that he had always tried to conceal a little by the way he handled his hands.

"At least I know that I am still myself. I'd know myself anywhere by that."

Then he went to sleep at his desk.

Jenny came in with a quick click-click-click of high heels, and he wakened to the noise.

"What are you doing dozing at your desk, Mr. Vincent? Have you been here all night?"

"I don't know, Jenny. Honestly I don't."

"I was only teasing. Sometimes when I get here a little early I take a catnap myself."

The clock said six minutes till eight and the second hand was sweeping normally. Time had returned to the world. Or to him. But had all that early morning of his been a dream? Then it had been a very efficient dream. He had accomplished work that he could hardly have done in two days. And it was the same day that it was supposed to be.

He went to the water fountain. The water now behaved normally. He went to the window. The traffic was behaving as it should. Though sometimes slow and sometimes snarled, yet it was in the pace of the regular world.

The other workers arrived. They were not balls of fire, but neither

was it necessary to observe them for several minutes to be sure they weren't dead.

"It did have its advantages," Charles Vincent said. "I would be afraid to live with it permanently, but it would be handy to go into for a few minutes a day and accomplish the business of hours. I may be a case for the doctor. But just how would I go about telling a doctor what was bothering me?"

Now it had surely been less than two hours from his first rising till the time that he wakened to the noise of Jenny from his second sleep. And how long that second sleep had been, or in which time enclave, he had no idea. But how account for it all? He had spent a long while in his own rooms, much longer than ordinary in his confusion. He had walked the city mile after mile in his puzzlement. And he had sat in the little park for hours and studied the situation. And he had worked at his own desk for an outlandish long time.

Well, he would go to the doctor. A man is obliged to refrain from making a fool of himself to the world at large, but to his own lawyer, his priest, or his doctor he will sometimes have to come as a fool. By their callings they are restrained from scoffing openly.

Dr. Mason was not particularly a friend. Charles Vincent realized with some unease that he did not have any particular friends, only acquaintances and associates. It was as though he were of a species slightly apart from his fellows. He wished now a little that he had a particular friend.

But Dr. Mason was an acquaintance of some years, had the reputation of being a good doctor, and besides Vincent had now arrived at his office and been shown in. He would either have to—well, that was as good a beginning as any.

"Doctor, I am in a predicament. I will either have to invent some symptoms to account for my visit here, or make an excuse and bolt, or tell you what is bothering me, even though you will think I am a new sort of idiot."

"Vincent, every day people invent symptoms to cover their visits here, and I know that they have lost their nerve about the real reason for coming. And every day people do make excuses and bolt. But experience tells me that I will get a larger fee if you tackle the third alternative. And, Vincent, there is no new sort of idiot."

Vincent said, "It may not sound so silly if I tell it quickly. I awoke this morning to some very puzzling incidents. It seemed that time itself had stopped, or that the whole world had gone into super-slow motion. The water would neither flow nor boil, and fire would not heat food. The clocks, which I first believed had stopped, crept along at perhaps a minute an hour. The people I met in the streets appeared dead, frozen in lifelike attitudes. And it was only by watching them

for a very long time that I perceived that they did indeed have motion. One car I saw creeping slower than the most backward snail, and a dead man at the wheel of it. I went to it, opened the door, and put on the brake. I realized after a time that the man was not dead. But he bent forward and broke his face on the steering wheel. It must have taken a full minute for his head to travel no more than ten inches, yet I was unable to prevent his hitting the wheel. I then did other bizarre things in a world that had died on its feet. I walked many miles through the city, and then I sat for hours in the park. I went to the office and let myself in. I accomplished work that must have taken me twenty hours. I then took a nap at my desk. When I awoke on the arrival of the others, it was six minutes to eight in the morning of the same day, today. Not two hours had passed from my rising, and time was back to normal. But the things that happened in that time that could never be compressed into two hours."

"One question first, Vincent. Did you actually accomplish the work of many hours?"

"I did. It was done, and done in that time. It did not become undone on the return of time to normal."

"A second question. Had you been worried about your work, about being behind?"

"Yes. Emphatically."

"Then here is one explanation. You retired last night. But very shortly afterward you arose in a state of somnambulism. There are facets of sleepwalking which we do not at all understand. The time-out-of-focus interludes were parts of a walking dream of yours. You dressed and went to your office and worked all night. It is possible to do routine tasks in a somnambulistic state rapidly and even feverishly, with an intense concentration—to perform prodigies. You may have fallen into a normal sleep there when you had finished, or you may have been awakened directly from your somnambulistic trance on the arrival of your co-workers. There, that is a plausible and workable explanation. In the case of an apparently bizarre happening, it is always well to have a rational explanation to fall back on. They will usually satisfy a patient and put his mind at rest. But often they do not satisfy me."

"Your explanation very nearly satisfies me, Dr. Mason, and it does put my mind considerably at rest. I am sure that in a short while I will be able to accept it completely. But why does it not satisfy you?"

"One reason is a man I treated early this morning. He had his face smashed, and he had seen—or almost seen—a ghost: a ghost of incredible swiftness that was more sensed than seen. The ghost opened the door of his car while it was going at full speed, jerked on the brake, and caused him to crack his head. This man was dazed and

had a slight concussion. I have convinced him that he did not see any ghost at all, that he must have dozed at the wheel and run into something. As I say, I am harder to convince than my patients. But it may have been coincidence."

"I hope so. But you also seem to have another reservation."

"After quite a few years in practice, I seldom see or hear anything new. Twice before I have been told a happening or a dream on the line of what you experienced."

"Did you convince your patients that it was only a dream?"

"I did. Both of them. That is, I convinced them the first few times it happened to them."

"Were they satisfied?"

"At first. Later, not entirely. But they both died within a year of their first coming to me."

"Nothing violent, I hope."

"Both had the gentlest deaths. That of senility extreme."

"Oh. Well, I'm too young for that."

"I would like you to come back in a month or so."

"I will, if the delusion or the dream returns. Or if I do not feel well."

After this Charles Vincent began to forget about the incident. He only recalled it with humor sometimes when again he was behind in his work.

"Well, if it gets bad enough I may do another sleepwalking act and catch up. But if there is another aspect of time and I could enter it at will, it might often be handy."

Charles Vincent never saw his face at all. It is very dark in some of those clubs and the Coq Bleu is like the inside of a tomb. He went to the clubs only about once a month, sometimes after a show when he did not want to go home to bed, sometimes when he was just plain restless.

Citizens of the more fortunate states may not know of the mysteries of the clubs. In Vincent's the only bars are beer bars, and only in the clubs can a person get a drink, and only members are admitted. It is true that even such a small club as the Coq Bleu had thirty thousand members, and at a dollar a year that is a nice sideline. The little numbered membership cards cost a penny each for the printing, and the member wrote in his own name. But he had to have a card—or a dollar for a card—to gain admittance.

But there could be no entertainments in the clubs. There was nothing there but the little bar room in the near darkness.

The man was there, and then he was not, and then he was there again. And always where he sat it was too dark to see his face.

"I wonder," he said to Vincent (or to the bar at large, though there

were no other customers and the bartender was asleep), "I wonder if you have ever read Zurbarin on the Relationship of Extradigitalism to Genius?"

"I have never heard of the work nor of the man," said Vincent. "I doubt if either exists."

"I am Zurbarin," said the man.

Vincent hid his misshapen left thumb. Yet it could not have been noticed in that light, and he must have been crazy to believe there was any connection between it and the man's remark. It was not truly a double thumb. He was not an extradigital, nor was he a genius.

"I refuse to become interested in you," said Vincent. "I am on the verge of leaving. I dislike waking the bartender, but I did want another drink."

"Sooner done than said."

"What is?"

"Your glass is full."

"It is? So it is. Is it a trick?"

"Trick is the name for anything either too frivolous or too mystifying for us to comprehend. But on one long early morning of a month ago, you also could have done the trick, and nearly as well."

"Could I have? How would you know about my long early morning—assuming there to have been such?"

"I watched you for a while. Few others have the equipment to watch you with when you're in the aspect."

So they were silent for some time, and Vincent watched the clock and was ready to go.

"I wonder," said the man in the dark, "if you have read Schimmelpenninck on the Sexagintal and the Duodecimal in the Chaldee Mysteries?"

"I have not and I doubt if anyone else has. I would guess that you are also Schimmelpenninck and that you have just made up the name on the spur of the moment."

"I am Schimm, it is true, but I made up the name on the spur of a moment many years ago."

"I am a little bored with you," said Vincent, "but I would appreciate it if you'd do your glass-filling trick once more."

"I have just done so. And you are not bored; you are frightened."

"Of what?" asked Vincent, whose glass was in fact full again.

"Of reentering a dread that you are not sure was a dream. But there are advantages to being both invisible and inaudible."

"Can you be invisible?"

"Was I not when I went behind the bar just now and fixed you a drink?"

"How?"

“A man in full stride goes at the rate of about five miles an hour. Multiply that by sixty, which is the number of time. When I leave my stool and go behind the bar, I go and return at the rate of three hundred miles an hour. So I am invisible to you, particularly if I move while you blink.”

“One thing does not match. You might have got around there and back, but you could not have poured.”

“Shall I say that mastery over liquids is not given to beginners? But for us there are many ways to outwit the slowness of matter.”

“I believe that you are a hoaxer. Do you know Dr. Mason?”

“I know that you went to see him. I know of his futile attempts to penetrate a certain mystery. But I have not talked to him of you.”

“I still believe that you are a phony. Could you put me back into the state of my dream of a month ago?”

“It was not a dream. But I could put you again into that state.”

“Prove it.”

“Watch the clock. Do you believe that I can point my finger at it and stop it for you? It is already stopped for me.”

“No, I don’t believe it. Yes, I guess I have to, since I see that you have just done it. But it may be another trick. I don’t know where the clock is plugged in.”

“Neither do I. Come to the door. Look at every clock you can see. Are they not all stopped?”

“Yes. Maybe the power has gone off all over town.”

“You know it has not. There are still lighted windows in those buildings, though it is quite late.”

“Why are you playing with me? I am neither on the inside nor the outside. Either tell me the secret or say that you will not tell me.”

“The secret isn’t a simple one. It can only be arrived at after all philosophy and learning have been assimilated.”

“One man cannot arrive at that in one lifetime.”

“Not in an ordinary lifetime. But the secret of the secret (if I may put it that way) is that one must use part of it as a tool in learning. You could not learn all in one lifetime, but by being permitted the first step—to be able to read, say, sixty books in the time it took you to read one, to pause for a minute in thought and use up only one second, to get a day’s work accomplished in eight minutes and so have time for other things—by such ways one may make a beginning. I will warn you, though. Even for the most intelligent, it is a race.”

“A race? What race?”

“It is a race between success, which is life, and failure, which is death.”

“Let’s skip the melodrama. How do I get into the state and out of it?”

“Oh, that is simple, so easy that it seems like a gadget. Here are two diagrams I will draw. Note them carefully. This first, envision it in your mind and you are in the state. Now this second one, envision, and you are out of it.”

“That easy?”

“That deceptively easy. The trick is to learn why it works—if you want to succeed, meaning to live.”

So Charles Vincent left him and went home, walking the mile in a little less than fifteen normal seconds. But he still had not seen the face of the man.

There are advantages intellectual, monetary, and amorous in being able to enter the accelerated state at will. It is a fox game. One must be careful not to be caught at it, nor to break or harm that which is in the normal state.

Vincent could always find eight or ten minutes unobserved to accomplish the day's work. And a fifteen-minute coffee break could turn into a fifteen-hour romp around the town.

There was this boyish pleasure in becoming a ghost: to appear and stand motionless in front of an onrushing train and to cause the scream of the whistle, and to be in no danger, being able to move five or ten times as fast as the train; to enter and to sit suddenly in the middle of a select group and see them stare, and then disappear from the middle of them; to interfere in sports and games, entering a prize ring and tripping, hampering, or slugging the unliked fighter; to blue-shot down the hockey ice, skating at fifteen hundred miles an hour and scoring dozens of goals at either end while the people only know that something odd is happening.

There was pleasure in being able to shatter windows by chanting little songs, for the voice (when in the state) will be to the world at sixty times its regular pitch, though normal to oneself. And for this reason also he was inaudible to others.

There was fun in petty thieving and tricks. He would take a wallet from a man's pocket and be two blocks away when the victim turned at the feel. He would come back and stuff it into the man's mouth as he bleated to a policeman.

He would come into the home of a lady writing a letter, snatch up the paper and write three lines and vanish before the scream got out of her throat.

He would take food off forks, put baby turtles and live fish into bowls of soup between spoonfuls of the eater.

He would lash the hands of handshakers tightly together with stout cord. He unzipped persons of both sexes when they were at their most pompous. He changed cards from one player's hand to another's. He removed golf balls from tees during the backswing and left notes



written large “YOU MISSED ME” pinned to the ground with the tee.

Or he shaved mustaches and heads. Returning repeatedly to one woman he disliked, he gradually clipped her bald and finally gilded her pate.

With tellers counting their money, he interfered outrageously and enriched himself. He snipped cigarettes in two with a scissors and blew out matches, so that one frustrated man broke down and cried at his inability to get a light.

He removed the weapons from the holsters of policemen and put cap pistols and water guns in their places. He unclipped the leashes of dogs and substituted little toy dogs rolling on wheels.

He put frogs in water glasses and left lighted firecrackers on bridge tables.

He reset wrist watches on wrists, and played pranks in men’s rooms.

“I was always a boy at heart,” said Charles Vincent.

Also during those first few days of the controlled new state, he established himself materially, acquiring wealth by devious ways, and opening bank accounts in various cities under various names, against a time of possible need.

Nor did he ever feel any shame for the tricks he played on unaccelerated humanity. For the people, when he was in the state, were as statues to him, hardly living, barely moving, unseeing, unhearing. And it is no shame to show disrespect to such comical statues.

And also, and again because he was a boy at heart, he had fun with the girls.

“I am one mass of black and blue marks,” said Jenny one day. “My lips are sore and my front teeth feel loosened. I don’t know what in the world is the matter with me.”

Yet he had not meant to bruise or harm her. He was rather fond of her and he resolved to be much more careful. Yet it was fun, when he was in the state and invisible to her because of his speed, to kiss her here and there in out-of-the-way places. She made a nice statue and it was good sport. And there were others.

“You look older,” said one of his co-workers one day. “Are you taking care of yourself? Are you worried?”

“I am not,” said Vincent. “I never felt better or happier in my life.”

But now there was time for so many things—time, in fact, for everything. There was no reason why he could not master anything in the world, when he could take off for fifteen minutes and gain fifteen hours. Vincent was a rapid but careful reader. He could now read from a hundred and twenty to two hundred books in an evening and night; and he slept in the accelerated state and could get a full night’s

sleep in eight minutes.

He first acquired a knowledge of languages. A quite extensive reading knowledge of a language can be acquired in three hundred hours world time, or three hundred minutes (five hours) accelerated time. And if one takes the tongues in order, from the most familiar to the most remote, there is no real difficulty. He acquired fifty for a starter, and could always add any other any evening that he found he had a need for it. And at the same time he began to assemble and consolidate knowledge. Of literature, properly speaking, there are no more than ten thousand books that are really worth reading and falling in love with. These were gone through with high pleasure, and two or three thousand of them were important enough to be reserved for future rereading.

History, however, is very uneven; and it is necessary to read texts and sources that for form are not worth reading. And the same with philosophy. Mathematics and science, pure or physical, could not, of course, be covered with the same speed. Yet, with time available, all could be mastered. There is no concept ever expressed by any human mind that cannot be comprehended by any other normal human mind, if time is available and it is taken in the proper order and context and with the proper preparatory work.

And often, and now more often, Vincent felt that he was touching the fingers of the secret; and always, when he came near it, it had a little bit the smell of the pit.

For he had pegged out all the main points of the history of man; or rather most of the tenable, or at least possible, theories of the history of man. It was hard to hold the main line of it, that double road of rationality and revelation that should lead always to a fuller and fuller development (not the fetish of progress, that toy word used only by toy people), to an unfolding and growth and perfectibility.

But the main line was often obscure and all but obliterated, and traced through fog and miasma. He had accepted the Fall of Man and the Redemption as the cardinal points of history. But he understood now that neither happened only once, that both were of constant occurrence; that there was a hand reaching up from that old pit with its shadow over man. And he had come to picture that hand in his dreams (for his dreams were especially vivid when in the state) as a six-digitated monster reaching out. He began to realize that the thing he was caught in was dangerous and deadly.

Very dangerous.

Very deadly.

One of the weird books that he often returned to and which continually puzzled him was the Relationship of Extradigitalism to Genius, written by the man whose face he had never seen, in one of

his manifestations.

It promised more than it delivered, and it intimated more than it said. Its theory was tedious and tenuous, bolstered with undigested mountains of doubtful data. It left him unconvinced that persons of genius (even if it could be agreed who or what they were) had often the oddity of extra fingers and toes, or the vestiges of them. And it puzzled him what possible difference it could make.

Yet there were hints here of a Corsican who commonly kept a hand hidden, or an earlier and more bizarre commander who wore always a mailed glove, of another man with a glove between the two; hints that the multiplex-adept, Leonardo himself, who sometimes drew the hands of men and often those of monsters with six fingers, may himself have had the touch. There was a comment of Caesar, not conclusive, to the same effect. It is known that Alexander had a minor peculiarity; it is not known what it was; this man made it seem that this was it. And it was averred of Gregory and Augustine, of Benedict and Albert and Aquinas. Yet a man with a deformity could not enter the priesthood; if they had it, it must have been in vestigial form.

There were cases for Charles Magnut and Mahmud, for Saladin the Horseman and for Akhnaton the King; for Homer (a Seleuciad-Greek statuette shows him with six fingers strumming an unidentified instrument while reciting); for Pythagoras, for Buonarroti, Santi, Theotokopoulous, van Rijn, Robusti.

Zurbarin catalogued eight thousand names. He maintained that they were geniuses. And that they were extradigitals.

Charles Vincent grinned and looked down at his misshapen or double thumb.

"At least I am in good though monotonous company. But what in the name of triple time is he driving at?"

And it was not long afterward that Vincent was examining cuneiform tablets in the State Museum. These were a broken and not continuous series on the theory of numbers, tolerably legible to the now encyclopedic Charles Vincent. And the series read in part:

"On the divergence of the basis itself and the confusion caused—for it is five, or it is six, or ten or twelve, or sixty or a hundred, or three hundred and sixty or the double hundred, the thousand. The reason, not clearly understood by the people, is that Six and the Dozen are first, and Sixty is a compromise in condescending to the people. For the five, the ten are late, and are no older than the people themselves. It is said, and credited, that people began to count by fives and tens from the number of fingers on their hands. But before the people the—by the reason that they had—counted by sixes and twelves. But Sixty is the number of time, divisible by both, for

both must live together in time, though not on the same plane of time—”

Much of the rest was scattered. And it was while trying to set the hundreds of unordered clay tablets in proper sequence that Charles Vincent created the legend of the ghost in the museum.

For he spent his multi-hundred-hour nights there studying and classifying. Naturally he could not work without light, and naturally he could be seen when he sat still at his studies. But as the slow-moving guards attempted to close in on him, he would move to avoid them, and his speed made him invisible to them. They were a nuisance and had to be discouraged. He belabored them soundly and they became less eager to try to capture him.

His only fear was that they would some time try to shoot him to see if he were ghost or human. He could avoid a seen shot, which would come at no more than two and a half times his own greatest speed. But an unperceived shot could penetrate dangerously, even fatally, before he twisted away from it.

He had fathered legends of other ghosts, that of the Central Library, that of University Library, that of the John Charles Underwood Jr. Technical Library. This plurality of ghosts tended to cancel out each other and bring believers into ridicule. Even those who had seen him as a ghost did not admit that they believed in the ghosts.

He went back to Dr. Mason for his monthly checkup.

“You look terrible,” said the Doctor. “Whatever it is, you have changed. If you can afford it, you should take a long rest.”

“I have the means,” said Charles Vincent, “and that is just what I will do. I’ll take a rest for a year or two.”

He had begun to begrudge the time that he must spend at the world’s pace. From now on he was regarded as a recluse. He was silent and unsociable, for he found it a nuisance to come back to the common state to engage in conversation, and in his special state voices were too slow-pitched to intrude into his consciousness.

Except that of the man whose face he had never seen.

“You are making very tardy progress,” said the man. Once more they were in a dark club. “Those who do not show more progress we cannot use. After all, you are only a vestigial. It is probable that you have very little of the ancient race in you. Fortunately those who do not show progress destroy themselves. You had not imagined that there were only two phases of time, had you?”

“Lately I have come to suspect that there are many more,” said Charles Vincent.

“And you understand that only one step cannot succeed?”

“I understand that the life I have been living is in direct violation of all that we know of the laws of mass, momentum, and acceleration, as

well as those of conservation of energy, the potential of the human person, the moral compensation, the golden mean, and the capacity of human organs. I know that I cannot multiply energy and experience sixty times without a compensating increase of food intake, and yet I do it. I know that I cannot live on eight minutes' sleep in twenty-four hours, but I do that also. I know that I cannot reasonably crowd four thousand years of experience into one lifetime, yet unreasonably I do not see what will prevent it. But you say I will destroy myself."

"Those who take only the first step destroy themselves."

"And how does one take the second step?"

"At the proper moment you will be given the choice."

"I have the most uncanny feeling that I will refuse the choice."

"From present indications, you will refuse it. You are fastidious."

"You have a smell about you, Old Man without a face. I know now what it is. It is the smell of the pit."

"Are you so slow to learn that?"

"It is the mud from the pit, the same from which the clay tablets were formed, from the old land between the rivers. I've dreamed of the six-fingered hand reaching up from the pit and overshadowing us all. And I have read: 'The people first counted by fives and tens from the number of fingers on their hands. But before the people—for the reason that they had—counted by sixes and twelves.' But time has left blanks in those tablets."

"Yes, time in one of its manifestations has deftly and with a purpose left those blanks."

"I cannot discover the name of the thing that goes in one of those blanks. Can you?"

"I am part of the name that goes into one of those blanks."

"And you are the man without a face. But why is it that you overshadow and control people? And to what purpose?"

"It will be long before you know those answers."

"When the choice comes to me, it will bear very careful weighing."

After that a chill descended on the life of Charles Vincent, for all that he still possessed his exceptional powers. And he seldom now indulged in pranks.

Except for Jennifer Parkey.

It was unusual that he should be drawn to her. He knew her only slightly in the common world and she was at least fifteen years his senior. But now she appealed to him for her youthful qualities, and all his pranks with her were gentle ones.

For one thing this spinster did not frighten, nor did she begin locking her doors, never having bothered about such things before. He would come behind her and stroke her hair, and she would speak out calmly with that sort of quickening in her voice: "Who are you? Why

won't you let me see you? You are a friend, aren't you? Are you a man, or are you something else? If you can caress me, why can't you talk to me? Please let me see you. I promise that I won't hurt you."

It was as though she could not imagine that anything strange would hurt her. Or again when he hugged her or kissed her on the nape, she would call: "You must be a little boy, or very like a little boy, whoever you are. You are good not to break my things when you move about. Come here and let me hold you."

It is only very good people who have no fear at all of the unknown.

When Vincent met Jennifer in the regular world, as he more often now found occasion to do, she looked at him appraisingly, as though she guessed some sort of connection.

She said one day: "I know it is an impolite thing to say, but you do not look well at all. Have you been to a doctor?"

"Several times. But I think it is my doctor who should go to a doctor. He was always given to peculiar remarks, but now he is becoming a little unsettled."

"If I were your doctor, I believe I would also become a little unsettled. But you should find out what is wrong. You look terrible."

He did not look terrible. He had lost his hair, it is true, but many men lose their hair by thirty, though not perhaps as suddenly as he had. He thought of attributing it to the air resistance. After all, when he was in the state he did stride at some three hundred miles an hour. And enough of that is likely to blow the hair right off your head. And might that not also be the reason for his worsened complexion and the tired look that appeared in his eyes? But he knew that this was nonsense. He felt no more air pressure when in his accelerated state than when in the normal one.

He had received his summons. He chose not to answer it. He did not want to be presented with the choice; he had no wish to be one with those of the pit. But he had no intention of giving up the great advantage which he now held over nature.

"I will have it both ways," he said. "I am already a contradiction and an impossibility. The proverb was only the early statement of the law of moral compensation: 'You can't take more out of a basket than it holds.' But for a long time I have been in violation of the laws and balances. 'There is no road without a turning,' 'Those who dance will have to pay the fiddler,' 'Everything that goes up comes down,' But are proverbs really universal laws? Certainly. A sound proverb has the force of universal law; it is but another statement of it. But I have contradicted the universal laws. It remains to be seen whether I have contradicted them with impunity. 'Every action has its reaction.' If I refuse to deal with them, I will provoke a strong reaction. The man without a face said that it was always a race between full knowing

and destruction. Very well, I will race them for it.”

They began to persecute him then. He knew that they were in a state as accelerated from his as his was from the normal. To them he was the almost motionless statue, hardly to be told from a dead man. To him they were by their speed both invisible and inaudible. They hurt him and haunted him. But still he would not answer the summons.

When the meeting took place, it was they who had to come to him, and they materialized there in his room, men without faces.

“The choice,” said one. “You force us to be so clumsy as to have to voice it.”

“I will have no part of you. You all smell of the pit, of that old mud of the cuneiforms of the land between the rivers, of the people who were before the people.”

“It has endured a long time, and we consider it as enduring forever. But the Garden which was in the neighborhood—do you know how long the Garden lasted?”

“I don’t know.”

“That all happened in a single day, and before nightfall they were outside. You want to throw in with something more permanent, don’t you.”

“No. I don’t believe I do.”

“What have you to lose?”

“Only my hope of eternity.”

“But you don’t believe in that. No man has ever really believed in eternity.”

“No man has ever either entirely believed or disbelieved in it,” said Charles Vincent.

“At least it cannot be proved,” said one of the faceless men. “Nothing is proved until it is over with. And in this case, if it is ever over with, then it is disproved. And all that time would one not be tempted to wonder, ‘What if, after all, it ends in the next minute?’”

“I imagine that if we survive the flesh we will receive some sort of surety,” said Vincent.

“But you are not sure either of such surviving or receiving. Now we have a very close approximation of eternity. When time is multiplied by itself, and that repeated again and again, does that not approximate eternity?”

“I don’t believe it does. But I will not be of you. One of you has said that I am too fastidious. So now will you say that you’ll destroy me?”

“No. We will only let you be destroyed. By yourself, you cannot win the race with destruction.”

After that Charles Vincent somehow felt more mature. He knew he was not really meant to be a six-fingered thing of the pit. He knew

that in some way he would have to pay for every minute and hour that he had gained. But what he had gained he would use to the fullest. And whatever could be accomplished by sheer acquisition of human knowledge, he would try to accomplish.

And he now startled Dr. Mason by the medical knowledge he had picked up, the while the doctor amused him by the concern he showed for Vincent. For he felt fine. He was perhaps not as active as he had been, but that was only because he had become dubious of aimless activity. He was still the ghost of the libraries and museums, but was puzzled that the published reports intimated that an old ghost had replaced a young one.

He now paid his mystic visits to Jennifer Parkey less often. For he was always dismayed to hear her exclaim to him in his ghostly form: "Your touch is so changed. You poor thing! Is there anything at all I can do to help you?"

He decided that somehow she was too immature to understand him, though he was still fond of her. He transferred his affections to Mrs. Milly Maltby, a widow at least thirty years his senior. Yet here it was a sort of girlishness in her that appealed to him. She was a woman of sharp wit and real affection, and she also accepted his visitations without fear, following a little initial panic.

They played games, writing games, for they communicated by writing. She would scribble a line, then hold the paper up in the air whence he would cause it to vanish into his sphere. He would return it in half a minute, or half a second by her time, with his retort. He had the advantage of her in time with greatly more opportunity to think up responses, but she had the advantage over him in natural wit and was hard to top.

They also played checkers, and he often had to retire apart and read a chapter of a book on the art between moves, and even so she often beat him; for native talent is likely to be a match for accumulated lore and codified procedure.

But to Milly also he was unfaithful in his fashion, being now interested (he no longer became enamored or entranced) in a Mrs. Roberts, a great-grandmother who was his elder by at least fifty years. He had read all the data extant on the attraction of the old for the young, but he still could not explain his successive attachments. He decided that these three examples were enough to establish a universal law: that a woman is simply not afraid of a ghost, though he touches her and is invisible, and writes her notes without hands. It is possible that amorous spirits have known this for a long time, but Charles Vincent had made the discovery himself independently.

When enough knowledge is accumulated on any subject, the pattern will sometimes emerge suddenly, like a form in a picture



revealed where before it was not seen. And when enough knowledge is accumulated on all subjects, is there not a chance that a pattern governing all subjects will emerge?

Charles Vincent was caught up in one last enthusiasm. On a long vigil, as he consulted source after source and sorted them in his mind, it seemed that the pattern was coming out clearly and simply, for all its amazing complexity of detail.

"I know everything that they know in the pit, and I know a secret that they do not know. I have not lost the race—I have won it. I can defeat them at the point where they believe themselves invulnerable. If controlled hereafter, we need at least not be controlled by them. It is all falling together now. I have found the final truth, and it is they who have lost the race. I hold the key. I will now be able to enjoy the advantage without paying the ultimate price of defeat and destruction, or of collaboration with them.

"Now I have only to implement my knowledge, to publish the fact, and one shadow at least will be lifted from mankind. I will do it at once. Well, nearly at once. It is almost dawn in the normal world. I will sit here a very little while and rest. Then I will go out and begin to make contact with the proper persons for the disposition of this thing. But first I will sit here a little while and rest."

And he died quietly in his chair as he sat there.

Dr. Mason made an entry in his private journal: "Charles Vincent, a completely authenticated case of premature aging, one of the most clear-cut in all gerontology. This man was known to me for years, and I here aver that as of one year ago he was of normal appearance and physical state, and that his chronology is also correct, I having also known his father. I examined the subject during the period of his illness, and there is no question at all of his identity, which has also been established for the record by fingerprinting and other means. I aver that Charles Vincent at the age of thirty is dead of old age, having the appearance and organic condition of a man of ninety."

Then the doctor began to make another note: "As in two other cases of my own observation, the illness was accompanied by a certain delusion and series of dreams, so nearly identical in the three men as to be almost unbelievable. And for the record, and no doubt to the prejudice of my own reputation, I will set down the report of them here."

But when Dr. Mason had written that, he thought about it for a while.

"No, I will do no such thing," he said, and he struck out the last lines he had written. "It is best to let sleeping dragons lie."

And somewhere the faceless men with the smell of the pit on them smiled to themselves in quiet irony.

# RATTLE OK, by Harry Warner, Jr.

Originally published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, December 1956.

The Christmas party at the Boston branch of Hartshorne-Logan was threatening to become more legendary than usual this Christmas.

The farm machinery manager had already collapsed. When he slid under the table containing the drinks, Miss Pringle, who sold millinery, had screamed: "He'll drown!"

One out of every three dirty stories started by party attendees had remained unfinished, because each had reminded someone else of another story.

The recently developed liquors which affected the bloodstream three times faster had driven away twinges of conscience about untrimmed trees and midnight church services.

The star salesman for mankies and the gentleman who was in charge of the janitors were putting on a display of Burmese foot-wrestling in one corner of the general office. The janitor foreman weighed fifty pounds less than the Burma gentleman, who was the salesman's customary opponent. So the climax of one tactic did not simply overturn the foreman. He glided through the air, crashing with a very loud thump against the wall.

He wasn't hurt. But the impact knocked the hallowed portrait of H. H. Hartshorne, co-founder, from its nail. It tinkled imposingly as its glass splintered against the floor.

The noise caused a temporary lull in the gaiety. Several employes even felt a passing suspicion that things might be getting out of hand.

"It's all in the spirit of good, clean fun!" cried Mr. Hawkins, the assistant general manager. Since he was the highest executive present, worries vanished. Everyone felt fine. There was a scurry to shove the broken glass out of sight and to turn more attention to another type of glasses.

Mr. Hawkins himself, acting by reflex, attempted to return the portrait to its place until new glass could be obtained. But the fall had sprung the frame at one corner and it wouldn't hang straight.

"We'd better put old H. H. away for safekeeping until after the holiday," he told a small, blonde salesclerk who was beneath his attention on any working day.

With the proper mixture of respect and bonhommie, he lifted the heavy picture out of its frame. A yellowed envelope slipped to the floor as the picture came free. Hawkins rolled the picture like a scroll and put it into a desk drawer, for later attention. Then he looked around for a drink that would make him feel even better.

A sorting clerk in the mail order department wasn't used to liquor. She picked up the envelope and looked around vaguely for the mail-opening machine.

"Hell, Milly, you aren't working!" someone shouted at her. "Have another!"

Milly snapped out of it. She giggled, suppressed a ladylike belch and returned to reality. Looking at the envelope, she said: "Oh, I see. They must have stuck it in to tighten the frame. Gee, it's old."

Mr. Hawkins had refreshed himself. He decided that he liked Milly's voice. To hear more of it, he said to her: "I'll bet that's been in there ever since the picture was framed. There's a company legend that that picture was put up the day this branch opened, eighty years ago."

"I didn't know the company ever used buff envelopes like this." Milly turned it over in her hands. The ancient glue crackled as she did so. The flap popped open and an old-fashioned order blank fell out.

Mr. Hawkins' eyes widened. He bent, reached painfully over his potbelly and picked up the order form.

"This thing has never been processed!" Raising his voice, he shouted jovially, "Hey, people! You're all fired! Here's an order that Hartshorne-Logan never filled! We can't have such carelessness. This poor woman has waited eighty years for her merchandise!"

\* \* \* \*

Milly was reading aloud the scrawled words on the order form:

"Best electric doorbell. Junior detective kit. Disposable sacks for vacuum cleaner. Dress for three-year-old girl." She turned to the assistant general manager, struck with an idea for the first time in her young life. "Let's fill this order right now!"

"The poor woman must be dead by now," he objected, secretly angry that he hadn't thought of such a fine party stunt himself. Then he brightened. "Unless—" he said it loud enough for the employees to scent a great proposal and the room grew quiet—"unless we broke the rules just once and used the time warp on a big mission!"

There was a silence. Finally, from an anonymous voice in one corner: "Would the warp work over eighty years? We were always told that it must be used only for complaints within three days."

"Then let's find out!" Mr. Hawkins downed the rest of his drink and pulled a batch of keys from his pocket. "Someone scoot down to the warehouse. Tell the watchman that it's on my authority. Hunt up the stuff that's on the order. Get the best of everything. Ignore the catalogue numbers—they've changed a hundred times in all these years."

Milly was still deciphering the form. Now she let out a little squeal of excitement.

“Look, Mr. Hawkins! The name on this order—it’s my great-grandmother! Isn’t that wonderful? I was just a little girl when she died. I can barely remember her as a real old woman. But I remember that my grandmother never bought anything from Hartshorne-Logan because of some trouble her mother had once with the firm. My mother didn’t want me to come to work here because of that.”

Mr. Hawkins put his arm around Milly in a way that he intended to look fatherly. It didn’t. “Well, now. Since it’s your relative, let’s thrill the old girl. We wouldn’t have vacuum sacks any more. So we’ll substitute a manky!”

\* \* \* \*

Ann Hartley was returning from mailing the letter when she found the large parcel on her doorstep. She put her hands on her hips and stared pugnaciously at the bundle.

“The minute I write a letter to complain about you, you turn up!” she told the parcel. She nudged her toe peevishly against the brown paper wrappings that were tied with a half-transparent twine she had never seen before.

The label was addressed in a wandering scrawl, a sharp contrast to the impersonal typing on the customary Hartshorne-Logan bundles. But the familiar RATTLE OK sticker was pasted onto the box, indicating to the delivery man that the contents would make a rattling sound and therefore hadn’t been broken in shipment.

Ann sighed and picked up her bundle. With a last look at the lovely spring afternoon and the quiet suburban landscape, she went into the house.

Two-year-old Sally heard the box rattling. She waddled up on chubby legs and grabbed her mother’s skirt. “Want!” she said decisively.

“Your dress ought to be here,” Ann said. She found scissors in her sewing box, tossed a cushion onto the floor, sat on it, and began to open the parcel.

“Now I’ll have to write another letter to explain that they should throw away my letter of complaint,” she told her daughter. “And by the time they get my second letter, they’ll have answered my first letter. Then they’ll write again.” Out of consideration for Sally, she omitted the expletives that she wanted to add.

The translucent cord was too tough for the scissors. Ann was about to hunt for a razor blade when Sally clutched at an intersection of the cord and yanked. The twine sprang away from the carton as if it were alive. The paper wrappings flapped open.

“There!” Sally said.

Ann repressed an irrational urge to slap her daughter. Instead, she

tossed the wrappings aside and removed the lid from the carton. A slightly crushed thin cardboard box lay on top. Ann pulled out the dress and shook it into a freely hanging position. Then she groaned.

It was green and she had ordered blue. It didn't remotely resemble the dress she had admired from the Hartshorne-Logan catalogue illustration. Moreover, the shoulders were lumpier than any small girl's dress should be.

But Sally was delighted. "Mine!" she shrilled, grabbing for the dress.

"It's probably the wrong size, too," Ann said, pulling off Sally's dress to try it on. "Let's find as many things to complain about as we can."

\* \* \* \*

The dress fitted precisely, except for the absurd shoulder bumps. Sally was radiant for a moment. Then her small face sobered and she started to look vacantly at the distant wall.

"We'll have to send it back," Ann said, "and get the one we ordered."

She tried to take it off, but the child squawked violently. Ann grabbed her daughter's arms, held them above her head and pulled at the dress. It seemed to be stuck somewhere. When Ann released the child's arms to loosen the dress, Sally squirmed away. She took one step forward, then began to float three inches above the ground. She landed just before she collided with the far wall.

Sally looked scared until she saw her mother's face. Then she squealed in delight.

Ann's legs were rubber. She was shaking her head and wobbling uncertainly toward her daughter when the door opened behind her.

"It's me," her husband said. "Slow day at the office, so I came home early."

"Les! I'm going crazy or something. Sally just—"

Sally crouched to jump at her father. Before she could leap, he grabbed her up bodily and hugged her. Then he saw the box.

"Your order's here? Good. What's this thing?" He was looking at a small box he had pulled from the carton. Its lid contained a single word: MANKY. The box rattled when he shook it.

Les pulled off the lid and found inside a circular, shiny metal object. A triangular trio of jacks stuck out from one end.

"Is this the doorbell? I've never seen a plug like this. And there's no wire."

"I don't know," Ann said. "Les, listen. A minute ago, Sally—"

He peered into the box for an instruction sheet, uselessly. "They must have made a mistake. It looks like some kind of farm

equipment.”

He tossed the manky onto the hassock and delved into the carton again. Sally was still in his arms.

“That’s the doorbell, I think,” he said, looking at the next object. It had a lovely, tubular shape, a half-dozen connecting rods and a plug for a wall socket.

“That’s funny,” Ann mused, her mind distracted from Sally for a moment. “It looks terribly expensive. Maybe they sent door chimes instead of the doorbell.”

The bottom of the carton contained the detective outfit that they had ordered for their son. Ann glanced at its glaringly lithographed cover and said: “Les, about Sally. Put her down a minute and watch what she does.”

Les stared at his wife and put the child onto the rug. Sally began to walk, then rose and again floated, this time toward the hassock on which the manky lay.

His jaw dropped. “My God! Ann, what—”

Ann was staring, too, but not at her daughter. “Les! The hassock! It used to be brown!”

The hassock was a livid shade of green. A neon, demanding, screaming green that clashed horribly with the soft browns and reds in which Ann had furnished the room.

“That round thing must be leaking,” Les said. “But did you see Sally when she—”

Ann’s frazzled nerves carried a frantic order to her muscles. She jumped up, strode to the hassock and picked up the manky with two fingers. She tossed it to Les. Immediately, she regretted her action.

“Drop it!” she yelled. “Maybe it’ll turn you green, too!”

Les kicked the hassock into the hall closet, tossed the manky in after it and shut the door firmly. As the door closed, he saw the entire interior of the dark closet brighten into a wet-lettuce green.

When he turned back to Ann, she was staring at her left hand. The wedding band that Les had put there a dozen years ago was a brilliant green, shedding its soft glow over the finger up to the first knuckle.

Ann felt the scream building up inside her. She opened her mouth to let it out, then put her hand in front of her mouth to keep it in, finally jerked the hand away to prevent the glowing ring from turning her front teeth green.

She collapsed into Les’s arms, babbling incomprehensibly.

He said: “It’s all right. There must be balloons or something in the shoulders of that dress. I’ll tie a paperweight to Sally’s dress and that’ll hold her down until we undress her. Don’t worry. And that green dye or whatever it is will wash off.”

Ann immediately felt better. She put her hands behind her back,

pulled off her ring and slipped it into her apron pocket. Les was sentimental about her removing it.

"I'll get dinner," she said, trying to keep her voice on an even keel. "Maybe you'd better start a letter to Hartshorne-Logan. Let's go into the kitchen, Sally."

Ann strode resolutely toward the rear of the house. She kept her eyes determinedly off the tinge of green that was showing through the apron pocket and didn't dare look back at her daughter's unsettling means of propulsion.

\* \* \* \*

A half-hour later, when the meal was almost ready, two things happened: Bob came home from school through the back door and a strange voice said from the front of the house, "Don't answer the front door."

Ann stared at her son. He stared back at her, the detective outfit under his arm.

She went into the front room. Her husband was standing with fists on hips, looking at the front door, chuckling. "Neatest trick I've seen in a long time. That voice you heard was the new doorbell. I put it up while you were in the kitchen. Did you hear what happened when old lady Burnett out there pushed the button?"

"Oh. Something like those name cards with something funny printed on them, like 'Another hour shot.' Well, if there's a little tape in there repeating that message, you'd better shut that part off. It might get boring after a while. And it might insult someone."

Ann went to the door and turned the knob. The door didn't open. The figure of Mrs. Burnett, half-visible through the heavy curtain, shifted impatiently on the porch.

Les yanked at the doorknob. It didn't yield for him, either. He looked up at the doorbell, which he had installed just above the upper part of the door frame.

"Queer," he said. "That isn't in contact with the door itself. I don't see how it can keep the door from opening."

Ann put her mouth close to the glass, shouting: "Won't you come to the back door, Mrs. Burnett? This one is stuck."

"I just wanted to borrow some sugar," the woman cried from the porch. "I realize that I'm a terrible bother." But she walked down the front steps and disappeared around the side of the house.

"Don't open the back door." The well-modulated voice from the small doorbell box threatened to penetrate every corner of the house. Ann looked doubtfully at her husband's lips. They weren't moving.

"If this is ventriloquism—" she began icily.

"I'll have to order another doorbell just like this one, for the office,"

Les said. "But you'd better let the old girl in. No use letting her get peeved."

The back door was already open, because it was a warm day. The screen door had no latch, held closed by a simple spring. Ann pushed it open when Mrs. Burnett waddled up the three back steps, and smiled at her neighbor.

"I'm so sorry you had to walk around the house. It's been a rather hectic day in an awful lot of ways."

\* \* \* \* \*

Something seemed to impede Mrs. Burnett as she came to the threshold. She frowned and shoved her portly frame against something invisible. It apparently yielded abruptly, because she staggered forward into the kitchen, nearly falling. She stared grimly at Ann and looked suspiciously behind her.

"The children have some new toys," Ann improvised hastily. "Sally is so excited over a new dress that she's positively feverish. Let's see now—it was sugar that you want, wasn't it?"

"I already have it," Bob said, handing a filled cup to his mother. The boy turned back to the detective set which he had spread over the kitchen table.

"Excitement isn't good for me," Mrs. Burnett said testily. "I've had a lot of troubles in my life. I like peace and quiet."

"Your husband is better?"

"Worse. I'm sure I don't know why everything happens to me." Mrs. Burnett edged toward the hall, trying to peer into the front of the house. Ann stood squarely in front of the door leading to the hall. Defeated, Mrs. Burnett left. A muffled volley of handclapping, mixed with a few faint cheers, came from the doorbell-box when she crossed the threshold.

Ann went into the hall to order Les to disconnect the doorbell. She nearly collided with him, coming in the other direction.

"Where did this come from?" Les held a small object in the palm of his hand, keeping it away from his body. A few drops of something unpleasant were dripping from his fingers. The object looked remarkably like a human eyeball. It was human-size, complete with pupil, iris and rather bloodshot veins.

"Hey, that's mine," Bob said. "You know, this is a funny detective kit. That was in it. But there aren't instructions on how it works."

"Well, put it away," Ann told Bob sharply. "It's slimy."

Les laid the eyeball on the table and walked away. The eyeball rolled from the smooth, level table, bounced twice when it hit the floor, then rolled along, six inches behind him. He turned and kicked at it. The eyeball rolled nimbly out of the path of the kick.



“Les, I think we’ve made poor Mrs. Burnett angry,” Ann said. “She’s so upset over her poor husband’s health and she thinks we’re insulting her.”

Les didn’t hear her. He strode to the detective set, followed at a safe distance by the eyeball, and picked up the box.

“Hey, watch out!” Bob cried. A small flashlight fell from the box, landed on its side and its bulb flashed on, throwing a pencil of light across Les’s hands.

\* \* \* \* \*

Bob retrieved the flashlight and turned it off while Les glanced through an instruction booklet, frowning.

“This toy is too complicated for a ten-year-old boy,” Les told his wife. “I don’t know why you ordered such a thing.” He tossed the booklet into the empty box.

“I’m going to return it, if you don’t smudge it up,” she replied. “Look at the marks you made on the instructions.” The black fingermarks stood out clearly against the shiny, coated paper.

Les looked at his hands. “I didn’t do it,” he said, pressing his clean fingertips against the kitchen table.

Black fingerprints, a full set of them, stood out against the sparkling polished table’s surface.

“I think the Detectolite did it,” Bob said. “The instructions say you’ve got to be very careful with it, because its effects last for a long time.”

Les began scrubbing his hands vigorously at the sink. Ann watched him silently, until she saw his fingerprints appear on the faucet, the soap and the towel. She began to yell at him for making such a mess, when Sally floated into the kitchen. The girl was wearing a nightgown.

“My God!” Ann forgot her tongue before the children. “She got out of that dress herself. Where did she get that nightgown?”

Ann fingered the garment. She didn’t recognize it as a nightgown. But in cut and fold, it was suspiciously like the dress that had arrived in the parcel. Her heart sank.

She picked up the child, felt the hot forehead, and said: “Les, I think it’s the same dress. It must change color or something when it’s time for a nap. It seems impossible, but—” She shrugged mutely. “And I think Sally’s running a temperature. I’m going to put her to bed.”

She looked worriedly into the reddened eyes of the small girl, who whimpered on the way to the bedroom. Ann carried her up the stairs, keeping her balance with difficulty, as Sally threatened to pop upward out of her arms.

The whole family decided that bed might be a good idea, soon after

dinner. When the lights went out, the house seemed to be nearly normal. Les put on a pair of gloves and threw a pillowcase over the eyeball. Bob rigged up trestles to warn visitors from the front porch. Ann put small wads of cotton into her ears, because she didn't like the rhythmic rattle, soft but persistent, that emerged from the hall closet where the manky sat. Sally was whining occasionally in her sleep.

\* \* \* \*

When daylight entered her room, Sally's nightgown had turned back into the new dress. But the little girl was too sick to get out of bed. She wasn't hungry, her nose was running, and she had a dry cough. Les called the doctor before going to work.

The only good thing about the morning for Ann was the fact that the manky had quieted down some time in the night. After she got Bob to school, she gingerly opened the closet door. The manky was now glowing a bright pink and seemed slightly larger. Deep violet lettering stood out on its side:

*"Today is Wednesday. For obvious reasons, the manky will not operate today."*

The mailman brought a letter from Hartshorne-Logan. Ann stared stupidly at the envelope, until she realized that this wasn't an impossibly quick answer to the letter she had written yesterday. It must have crossed in the mail her complaint about the non-arrival of the order. She tore open the envelope and read:

We regret to inform you that your order cannot be filled until the balance you owe us has been reduced. From the attached form, you will readily ascertain that the payment of \$87.56 will enable you to resume the purchasing of merchandise on credit. We shall fill your recent order as soon.

...

Ann crumpled the letter and threw it into the imitation fireplace, knowing perfectly well that it would need to be retrieved for Les after work tonight. She had just decided to call Hartshorne-Logan's complaint department when the phone rang.

"I'm afraid I must ask you to come down to the school, Mrs. Morris," a voice said. "Your son is in trouble. He claims that it's connected with something that his parents gave him."

"My son?" Ann asked incredulously. "Bob?"

"Yes. It's a little gadget that looks like a water pistol. Your son insists that he didn't know it would make clothing transparent. He claims it was just accident that he tried it out when he was walking by the gym during calisthenics. We've had to call upon every family in the neighborhood for blankets. Bob has always been a good boy and

we believe that we can expel him quietly without newspaper publicity involving his name, if you'll—"

"I'll be right down," Ann said. "I mean I won't be right down. I've got a sick baby here. Don't do anything till I telephone my husband. And I'm sorry for Bob. I mean I'm sorry for the girls, and for the boys, too. I'm sorry for—for everything. Good-by."

Just as she hung up the telephone, the doorbell rang. It rang with a normal buzz, then began to play soft music. Ann opened the door without difficulty, to admit Dr. Schwartz.

"You aren't going to believe me, Doctor," Ann said while he took the child's temperature, "but we can't get that dress off Sally."

"Kids are stubborn sometimes." Dr. Schwartz whistled softly when he looked at the thermometer. "She's pretty sick. I want a blood count before I try to move her. Let me undress her."

Sally had been mumbling half-deliriously. She made no effort to resist as the doctor picked her up. But when he raised a fold of the dress and began to pull it back, she screamed.

The doctor dropped the dress and looked in perplexity at the point where it touched Sally's skin.

"It's apparently an allergy to some new kind of material. But I don't understand why the dress won't come off. It's not stuck tight."

"Don't bother trying," Ann said miserably. "Just cut it off."

Dr. Schwartz pulled scissors from his bag and clipped at a sleeve. When he had cut it to the shoulder, he gently began to peel back the edges of the cloth. Sally writhed and kicked, then collapsed in a faint. The physician smoothed the folds hastily back into place.

He looked helpless as he said to Ann: "I don't know quite what to do. The flesh starts to hemorrhage when I pull at the cloth. She'd bleed to death if I yanked it off. But it's such an extreme allergy that it may kill her, if we leave it in contact with the skin."

The manky's rattle suddenly began rhythmically from the lower part of the house. Ann clutched the side of the chair, trying to keep herself under control. A siren wailed somewhere down the street, grew louder rapidly, suddenly going silent at the peak of its crescendo.

Dr. Schwartz glanced outside the window. "An ambulance. Looks as if they're stopping here."

"Oh, no," Ann breathed. "Something's happened to Les."

"It sure will," Les said grimly, walking into the bedroom. "I won't have a job if I can't get this stuff off my fingers. Big black fingerprints on everything I touch. I can't handle correspondence or shake hands with customers. How's the kid? What's the ambulance doing out front?"

"They're going to the next house down the street," the physician said. "Has there been sickness there?"

Les held up his hands, palms toward the doctor. "What's wrong with me? My fingers look all right. But they leave black marks on everything I touch."

The doctor looked closely at the fingertips. "Every human has natural oil on the skin. That's how detectives get results with their fingerprint powder. But I've never heard of nigrification, in this sense. Better not try to commit any crimes until you've seen a skin specialist."

\* \* \* \* \*

Ann was peering through the window, curious about the ambulance despite her own troubles. She saw two attendants carry Mr. Burnett, motionless and white, on a stretcher from the house next door into the ambulance. A third member of the crew was struggling with a disheveled Mrs. Burnett at the door. Shrieks that sounded like "Murder!" came sharply through the window.

"I know those bearers," Dr. Schwartz said. He yanked the window open. "Hey, Pete! What's wrong?"

The front man with the stretcher looked up. "I don't know. This guy's awful sick. I think his wife is nuts."

Mrs. Burnett had broken free. She dashed halfway down the sidewalk, gesticulating wildly to nobody in particular.

"It's murder!" she screamed. "Murder again! He's been poisoned! He's going to die! It means the electric chair!"

The orderly grabbed her again. This time he stuffed a handkerchief into her mouth to quiet her.

"Come back to this house as soon as you deliver him," Dr. Schwartz shouted to the men. "We've got a very sick child up here."

"I was afraid this would happen," Les said. "The poor woman already has lost three husbands. If this one is sick, it's no wonder she thinks that somebody is poisoning him."

Bob stuck his head around the bedroom door. His mother stared unbelievably for a moment, then advanced on him threateningly. Something in his face restrained her, just as she was about to start shaking him.

"I got something important to tell you," Bob said rapidly, ready to duck. "I snuck out of the principal's office and came home. I got to tell you what I did."

"I heard all about what you did," Ann said, advancing again. "And you're not going to slip away from me."

"Give me a chance to explain something. Downstairs. So he won't hear," Bob ended in a whisper, nodding toward the doctor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ann looked doubtfully at Les, then followed Bob down the stairs. The doorbell was monotonously saying in a monotone: "Don't answer me, don't answer me, don't go to the door."

"Why did you do it?" Ann asked Bob, her anger suddenly slumping into weary sadness. "People will suspect you of being a sex maniac for the rest of your life. You can't possibly explain—"

"Don't bother about the girls' clothing," Bob said, "because it was only an accident. The really important thing is something else I did before I left the house."

Les, cursing softly, hurried past them on the way to answer the knocking. He ignored the doorbell's pleas.

"I forgot about it," Bob continued, "when that ray gun accidentally went off. Then when they put me in the principal's office, I had time to think, and I remembered. I put some white stuff from the detective kit into that sugar we lent Mrs. Burnett last night. I just wanted to see what would happen. I don't know exactly what effect—"

"He put stuff in the sugar?" A deep, booming voice came from the front of the house. Mother and son looked through the hall. A policeman stood on the threshold of the front door. "I heard that! The woman next door claims that her husband is poisoned. Young man, I'm going to put you under arrest."

The policeman stepped over the threshold. A blue flash darted from the doorbell box, striking him squarely on the chest. The policeman staggered back, sitting down abruptly on the porch. A scent of ozone drifted through the house.

"Close the door, close the door," the doorbell was chanting urgently.

"Where's that ambulance?" Dr. Schwartz yelled from the top of the steps. "The child's getting worse."

Something splintered in the hall closet door. The manky zoomed through the hole it had broken and began ricocheting wildly through the house like a crazed living creature, smashing ornaments, cracking the plaster.

Les rushed through the front door to try to pick up the policeman. The officer drew his gun. An unearthly scream of "Help!" shrieked out of the doorbell.

Ann put her hands over her eyes, as if that would make the unbelievable scene vanish.

\* \* \* \* \*

Three days after the Christmas party, in the middle of inventory, when her headache had completely vanished, Milly began to worry.

She talked the situation over for one whole afternoon with her best friend at Hartshorne-Logan, a girl in the complaint department. That

same evening, after work, Milly went to the public library for the first time in her life. She borrowed a thick tome on the theory of time travel. But only three sentences in the first ten pages were comprehensible to her. She turned to her manky for comfort before going to bed.

The next morning, she braved the protective screen of secretaries, receptionists and sub-officials who ordinarily protected Mr. Hawkins from minor annoyances, and penetrated to his office.

Mr. Hawkins didn't recognize her when she walked in. His attitude became much more formal when she reminded him of their actions on Christmas Eve.

"So you see, Mr. Hawkins," Milly concluded earnestly, "I'm worried. We had so much fun at that party that we didn't think about what we might do to those folks in the past."

"You should understand," Mr. Hawkins firmly replied, "that I was not enjoying myself at the party. Definitely not. I must engage in the painful duty of assuming a pose of gaiety on special occasions, such as the annual office party."

Milly shot him a withering look, but didn't argue that particular point. She continued: "So I've been thinking. We might have done a terrible thing. Sending that dress to a kid without the right underclothing could be real dangerous. Maybe even fatal."

"We cannot harm people in the long ago, any more than the past could conceivably harm us."

"But don't you see?" Milly fought to restrain tears of fright and frustration. "I'm not *sure*! And it's the most important thing in the world to me. That little girl who got the dress is my grandmother. If she died while she was a little girl, there wouldn't be any me. I can't be born, if my grandmother died before she was three years old."

"The paradoxes of time travel have been greatly exaggerated," Mr. Hawkins said. "Perhaps a genealogist would be able to clear up the question."

Milly rose to her full five-foot height, suddenly furious. "You don't care if I just vanish all of a sudden! All that you care about is keeping yourself out of a lot of bother!" She turned, walked to the door, and added: "After I've helped to fill forty orders every working day for the past three years!"

Milly stalked out and slammed the door behind her. Then she stopped, just outside the door, waiting for a chain reaction to occur. It did, about five seconds later.

Mr. Hawkins popped through the door with a shout: "Where's that girl?" He was through the reception room and halfway down the hall when Milly called him back.

"Here I am," she said sweetly.

He grabbed her arm and yanked her into his office.

"You know," he said, "I've been thinking about those poor, unfortunate people in the past, too. Now that you mention it, I believe we should do something for them." He wiped his forehead.

"You've been thinking about a poor, unfortunate manager right here in the present," Milly retorted, sure of her position now. "All of a sudden, you've figured out what it will mean if I vanish because my grandmother never had any children. You realize that if I've never existed, all of a sudden Hartshorne-Logan will have thousands of complaint letters, lawsuits about orders over the past three years. You're thinking about what's going to happen to your position, if you're to blame for all those customers not getting their merchandise."

Mr. Hawkins turned away until he got his face under control. "We'll talk about that later," he said mildly at last. "Let's agree that everyone will be happier if we straighten up matters. And don't you think that *just we two* should do the straightening up ourselves? It'll be simpler if —uh—other officials don't hear about this."

\* \* \* \* \*

When Ann took her hands away from her eyes the mess was still more complicated. The new factor was a short young girl who was walking up to the house. She was looking about, like a country girl suddenly whisked to Times Square.

The policeman whirled when he heard footsteps behind him. "What do you want?"

"I'm afraid that I'm to blame for the whole thing," Milly told the officer. "I represent Hartshorne-Logan. We've just discovered that we made several mistakes when we filled an order for this family. I've come to pick up the wrong merchandise."

The doorbell made ominous clucking sounds, as Milly reached the threshold.

She looked up at the box and told Ann: "I'm afraid that I can't get in while that defective doorbell is working. Will you cut off the house current for a minute, while I disconnect it?"

Les blinked at her, then began to curse, loudly and bitterly. "Why didn't I think of that?"

Les dodged the manky's careening and headed for the fuse box.

Milly called after him: "Maybe there are bananas in the refrigerator. Take them out right away, if there are. The manky will quiet down then."

Ann rushed to the kitchen, yanked out the three bananas and threw them through the open window. She heard the dull thud from the front room as the manky fell to the carpet and lay motionless.

"I've pulled the switch!" Les yelled.

The policeman warily stepped through the door, looking at Les. Dr. Schwartz intercepted the policeman.

"Officer," Dr. Schwartz said, "there's a very sick little girl upstairs. I think you'll do your duty best by trying to hurry up an ambulance."

"But there's a murder charge floating around and I practically heard a confession," the policeman protested, slightly dazed.

Milly had pulled down the doorbell assembly. She put it beside the manky, then scooped up the remaining sections of Bob's detective kit and put them on the pile. She headed for the stairs, calling over her shoulder: "Don't worry about your detective set troubles. Those things wear off in twenty-four hours."

\* \* \* \*

Staggering slightly under the load of merchandise, Milly tiptoed into her grandmother's room. When she heard Dr. Schwartz trailing her curiously, she turned to him, whispering: "I'll watch over the little girl. You go down and explain to that policeman that there wasn't anything harmful in the chemicals in the detective set, and there was a short circuit in the doorbell, and that the child must be allergic to the dress. It was all Hartshorne-Logan's fault, not this family's."

"But what about that thing?" Dr. Schwartz said, pointing to the manky.

Milly tried frantically to think of a believable explanation and changed the subject: "The policeman said something about a murder confession. There was genuine truth talk in the detective set. If someone swallowed any of it, it might be a genuine confession."

"My goodness!" Dr. Schwartz raced downstairs.

Milly bent over the child who would become her grandmother. Sally lay flushed and feverish on the big bed, sunk into a deep coma. Milly bent and kissed her grandmother, then quickly deactivated the anti-grav pads in the shoulders. After that, it took only a moment to decamouflage the zippers which held the crash force. The dress then slipped right off.

Sally sighed the instant the dress fell free. Her skin was already returning to its normal hue by the time Milly had taken another dress from a bureau drawer. Milly slipped it onto Sally and covered her up to prevent a chill.

Milly kissed the child again and looked at the ancestor whom she had known only as a tiny old lady. Then she gathered up her pile of merchandise, tossing on top the dress, with its shoulder pads again activated.

The commotion downstairs was still loud, but it no longer sounded hysterical. Milly ticked off the order list on her fingers, to make sure she had collected everything. Then she opened the bedroom window.



Buoyed by the anti-grav force, she floated to the ground, landing with only a slight jar.

She darted through the back-yard, away from the house, attracting no attention. Everyone in the block had convened at the front of the house, where Mrs. Burnett was screaming out a full confession and the policeman was sweatingly scribbling it down.

Mrs. Burnett was explaining in trying detail the exact manner in which she had poisoned her four husbands in the past seven years, to collect their insurance.

\* \* \* \*

When Milly returned to Hartshorne-Logan of the future, she sank wearily into a chair. She held her hand out and watched it quiver.

“Golly, I didn’t realize how scared I was, until I got back,” she told Mr. Hawkins. “But I think I did only one thing wrong. I forgot to figure out some alibi for my great-uncle to use for his accident with the clothes penetration ray.”

“Your ancestors will forget all about that in their excitement over the insurance company rewards,” Mr. Hawkins assured her. “I checked way back on the old records. I see that your great-grandmother paid her bill, right after the date when all this trouble came up. But she never bought another thing from Hartshorne-Logan.”

“Well, it’s a good thing that time travel can’t cause trouble both ways,” Milly reflected. “I don’t think I’ll even go to next year’s Christmas party.”

“No danger of time travel bothering us. Nothing could come from the past into the present that could possibly hurt us.”

“Gee, I’m glad,” Milly said, and sneezed. It frightened her because sneezes were unknown in this world from which the cold virus had been eradicated. Then she sneezed again.

A little later, Mr. Hawkins began to sneeze.

Three billion sniffing, coughing, nose-blowing persons throughout the world were soon proof that Mr. Hawkins had blundered again.

# EGOBOO: Or, The Time Traveler's Travail, by Manly Banister

A Romantic Fantasy of the Fortieth Century

Originally published in 1950.

## FOREWORD

EGOBOO is strictly fiction—its characters, places and incidents are fictional. It is, admittedly, satire, but satire without the sting of malice or animosity. It is a mirror like one of those you find at amusement places, laughably distorting what they reflect. And as being such a mirror, it is held up for the benefit of a certain element of Fandom; so that that element may see itself as it is seen.

Specifically, it is desired that a particular individual will observe of himself the caricature herein, the picture being drawn from the impression made by sundry of the fellow's writings. Such individual will have only to open his mouth in rebuttal to show that he does. It is the purpose of EGOBOO (insofar as it needs a purpose other than the hours of amusement its preparation already has provided its author and publisher) to point out to this irresponsible character the ridiculous aspect of his contention, that his opinions are of greater value than the accomplished WORKS of any other individual, fan, amateur, or professional!

Members of the element under discussion have devoted their writings to personalizing against fellow fans whom they know only by name and to violently assailing professional authors, editors, and publishers who they know cannot answer them because of the cheapening thereby of their professional reputations.

The publisher of EGOBOO takes no stand for any individual fan or professional author, editor, or publisher. He does take a stand for some measure of tact and urbanity in the expression of argument and opinion, and for the observance of the precepts of humanity and of American freedom of speech—the latter not to be confused with license.

What fan journalism needs is not censorship, but a searching self-analysis and the use of discrimination in its choice and treatment of material.

As an afterthought, there might be less of this forensic crud cluttering up the mails, if every locutor were obliged to handset his own in six-point type!

THE PUBLISHER.

The Time Traveler stepped into his time machine and slammed the door.

Resolute and grim of purpose, he turned the branistan on the frumistat. Instantly, the walls of his laboratory blurred, wavered, became an encroaching, opalescent mist surcharged with flickering electrical manifestations of the tortus quanta. There was no bodily sensation. He had known there would be none, though the new scene winked on almost simultaneously with vanishment of the old in startling suddenness that was rather like a physical shock.

At first, he thought an immense forest surrounded him. He was conscious of a stalked, branchy mass on every hand, toweringly visible through the quartz vision panels of the machine. The tangle arched and interlaced overhead, became a soaring canopy that hovered with claustrophobial intimacy over the dwarfed time machine.

Then he saw that indeed they were not trees, but skeletal masses of steel, beryllium, copper, strange and un-known alloys of multihued metals that glittered fantastically in the gloom which was scarcely alleviated by penetrating random shafts of the westering sun.

Near and far in the jungle-like mass, flickering lights blazed, waned, and died. Screaming red, brilliant green, electric blue—everywhere the tube-lights flared in scintillant coruscations of electrically excited gases. Their varicolored glow clashed in an eye-searing jangle.

“Goodness gravius, Flavius! This is the place,” murmured the Time Traveler and stepped out of the machine.

The time machine vanished immediately, but the Time Traveler only smiled. It had not gone far. By a mental beam, he had anchored it in hyperspace, so that it would always be within reach, wherever he might go in the three-dimensional continuum of this world. It needed but a thought to recall the machine at once.

Sound assaulted his ears. All about him in the vast skeleton of the metallic structure, machines hummed and whirled, snickered, crackled, and zapped. The Time Traveler strolled casually to the side of a busy little man performing with an oil-can upon a monstrous machine that snored with a sonorous vibration.

“I say,” he spoke politely. “When are we?”

The little man whirled, a fierce expression curling his smooth upper lip. In this world, no man grew whiskers. The Time Traveler was to become accustomed to the sight of men with hairless, rose-petal cheeks.

“Another Throw Up out o’ the religious Past!” he snarled, clutching the oil-can to his scraggly bosom.

“I *am* from the Past,” the Traveler agreed, “but what do you mean

by ‘religious’?”

“Old style, bud!” snapped the little man. You call your period A.D. for religious reasons. Religion has been pseudoscientifically proved to be a psychopathic aberration in the pre-Fan stage of intellectual development. We are used to Throw Ups. Whenever one of you proto-fen gets deep enough into pseudoscientific principles, you fool around until you get thrown up here, where you’re old-fashioned and superfluous—*this is ultimate Fandom!*”

The Time Traveler mused briefly upon fen he had known who had vanished suddenly from fandom.

A goddess-like creature, clad in an air of pensive sweetness (and not much else), drifted by, clutching a pair of wicked-looking ray-guns to her marble bosom.

“*She’s a Heroine!*” the little man observed happily.

“I beg your pardon—what did you say?”

“Whaja say—whaja say?” pipingly mimicked the other. Whooshe? Why, a Heroine, of course! That’s a Class, bub! And *some* class, too, I’d say!”

“I don’t get this,” begged the Time Traveler. “You seem to find it not at all unreasonable that I am from the Past. You should also realize, then, that I, like any stranger, have no particularly accurate idea of what your civilization is like. What world this?”

The little man spat carefully.

“This is EGOBOO, prime world of the Pseudoscientific Universe. We represent the zenith of accomplishment of the Pseudoscientific Principle promulgated, advocated, and practiced by the race of Fen. That babe you just remarked ankling past is a Heroine.” He looked wistful.

“Course, nobody dast touch a Heroine ’cept a Hero.” He sighed, then, brightened. “But there’s Jills, an’ Space Floozies for the rest of us! Y’see, the Fen are divided into classes, Heroes, Heroines, Rocketeers, Spacehands, and the like. There’s about a million classes, and more are created every year by the Prime Pseudoscientist.”

“Who is this Prime Pseudoscientist?”

A beatific expression transfixed the features of the meager little man.

“The gre-e-a-at gho-hod Vermillionn Swampwaterr XCVI!” he chanted and promptly fell flat on his face in a fit of cerebral ecstasy.

Entirely helpless in the face of this unexpected turn of events, the Time Traveler carefully stepped over the prostrate, twitching fellow and sought a path deeper into the metallic jungle.

He followed a broad lane through the forest of beams and girders, observing with an alive interest the bizarre tangle of machines, machines, and more machines, of which the planet seemed to be

entirely composed in this ultimate age of pseudoscience. Every imaginable device was represented, each one functioning without purpose, clicking, buzzing, whirring, and glowing.

Light pleasure cars and heavy haulers whizzed past him on the broad highway, each at an identical, dizzying speed. Fen in the pleasure cars waved gaily at him while passing, and when he gestured with a thumb, they shouted, "No room! No room! Can't stop! Can't stop!" like characters from a scene in *Alice in Wonderland*.

"Hsssstt!"

The sound pierced sharply through the whirl of racing motors, and the Time Traveler looked quickly around.

"Hey! Look up here!"

The Time Traveler looked up and beheld a fellow in crimson cloak, green tunic, broad-belted yellow pegtops, boots, and an aviation helmet possessing wings and a crest. He was perched on the tower rung of a swaying ladder of ropy metal that seemed to depend from a point above the arching, interlaced roof.

"Are you a Hero?" the Traveler asked mildly.

"Nah!" hissed the apparition. "I'm a Radical spy! I just dress like a Hero to fool the Pseudos—they don't dare lay hand on a Hero, y'know... C'mon up!"

"I can't fly—really!" said the Time Traveler.

In response, the pseudo-Superman swooped to ground level and seized the Traveler around the waist with one powerful arm. The Traveler felt himself leave the ground. There was a rush of wind in his face, a sensation of extreme ascending velocity; then he dangled with the Futureman a foot below the open side door of a hovering air-car.

"In you go!" grunted the fellow, and thrust the Time Traveler upward into the machine, no mean feat for a synthetic Hero to accomplish, and followed agilely after.

For a long moment he stared down at the matted canopy of metal; then with slitted eyes quickly scanned the horizon. Satisfied that the darting shapes he observed were only spaceships departing for and returning from all parts of the Galaxy, he turned to the controls.

"I think we're safe," he muttered, putting the air-car into motion, "You're lucky I happened to be scanning this sector of EGOBOO with my Fernray Visi-Dissector, Pastman, or the Pseudos would have got you!"

"What makes you think I am from the Past?"

"Your clothes, bud! Nobody but a Fan from the 20th Century, D.A., would wear a rig like that!"

"You mean A.D., don't you?"

"D.A., bud. Dark Ages." The air-car sped with increasing velocity toward the horizon, a blurred streak a hundred feet above the canopy

of interlaced metal that appeared to cover the whole of this pseudoscientific world. “You are now in the Third Millennium of the Pseudoscientific Era,” he went on, “under the enlightened leadership of Vermillion Swampwaterr—Verminn XCVI!” There was an ironic undercurrent to the Futureman’s tone that was not lost on the Time Traveler.

“Who are the Radicals?” he asked.

The Futureman scowled apprehensively. “We are an association of Futurefen, Throw Ups from the Past, literary men and women, scientists, doctors, natural philosophers, etc. We live underground in ‘The Woods’—where the Pseudos cannot penetrate, because it is guarded by the applications of Real Science, against which the fantastic inventions of Pseudoscience are powerless. How long you been here in EGOBOO, bud?”

“Only a few hours. I left the Past at 1950 A.D.”

“Ten years before the uprising of Verminn the First,” observed the pilot.

“Who was he?”

“Vermillion Swampwaterr—‘Verminn’ for short, y’see. He founded EGOBOO and the Pseudoscientific Era.”

“I recall the name,” returned the Time Traveler. “It was considered probably a group synonym for subversive fen—a semantically pseudoscientific plausibility.”

“It was after you left,” the pilot went on, “that Verminn began to experiment with the Pseudoscientific Principle. Science-fiction, he said, had demonstrably proved itself to be centuries ahead of real science. Scientists, ergo, were outmoded. Verminn’s research along lines of the pseudoscientific principle developed the H-bomb in less than two weeks—a problem that had baffled real scientists for years! In 1960, Verminn and both of his friends rose in armed rebellion and issued a Proclamation.”

“A proclamation?”

“*The Proclamation.* All fen, it read, were thenceforth to read those science-fiction stories in the s/f magazines specifically approved by Verminn. No one should ever again read weird or fantasy stories. Further, the Proclamation went on to say, no fan was to publish any fanzine (we call them fozzines now—it sounds more pseudoscientific) without the express permission of Verminn himself.”

“What happened?”

“Revolt, of course Fandom revolted immediately and in its entirety—a great surprise to Verminn! Displeased, he proclaimed the whole world one State of Fandom; and the world revolted. Verminn’s paranoia took the form of a delusion of persecution. Being unable to tolerate this dissidence and evidence of dissatisfaction with his

personal prejudices, hatreds, dislikes, spleens, etc., Verminn whipped out his pseudoscientific H-bomb and practically destroyed the world.”

The Time Traveler shuddered.

“And *this* is the outcome! Do none now revolt?”

“Nobody but us Radicals,” said the pilot gloomily. “As a consequence of Verminn’s H-bomb attack, the editorial staff of *Weird Yarns Magazine* was driven underground, where they continued to publish weirdies for a few fen who preferred the hunted freedom of choosing their own reading material to the outrageous dictates of Verminn, who; of course, justified his course of action with the announcement that he acted ‘for the best interests of Fandom’.”

“Some such clack as that was a favorite catch-phrase of his in my time,” observed the Time Traveler.

“All the advocates of science-fiction as a literary art,” the pilot went on, “as well as those who wrote or read fantasy of any kind other than Verminn’s particular dish, were hunted down and destroyed in the days following the H-bombing. Samson Seahorse, editor of *Stultifying Science Stories*, Verminn discovered, augmented his meager editorial income (he was paid in old but uncanceled postage stamps steamed from the return envelopes accompanying accepted mss.—the reason he bought so many)—any-hoo, Seahorse wrote in his spare time and among other things, sold love pulps to the *Boudoir Classics* chain. This so enraged Verminn, he created Seahorse thermidor via the boiled-in-oil method. And so it went.”

“But *how* did he discover the science-baffling H-bomb?”

“You are familiar with the A-bomb in your time, and know that it required a critical mass of U-235 to produce the explosion?”

“Yes, I know that. Go on.”

“Applying the principles of pseudoscience, Verminn discovered that a quantity of hydrogen need be brought into proximity with *only small part of* a critical mess, and it detonated with astounding violence 1000 times more powerful than the A-bomb! It was easy to extract hydrogen from the air—Verminn himself was the ‘critical mess’! The bomb he created was nothing more than a flask of hydrogen with a hair from Verminn’s head triggered to penetrate the gas at the crucial moment. Who could withstand him? Of course, Verminn remained bald from the time of the H-bombing; but, as he said, “No sacrifice for the good of Fandom is too great!”

The pilot glanced out the side window.

“Here we are. Hold your hat!”

The air-car dropped with a sickening lurch. The Time Traveler grabbed and hung on. He was momentarily conscious of a wall of green vegetation flashing upward, then the wall became bluish, blurred like the surface of a racing river; and the Time Traveler

suspected that they plummeted into the bowels of the earth through some kind of metal-lined tube.

The air-car slowed its descent, feathered to a gentle landing on a smooth, hard surface.

"Welcome to Fantasia!" said the pilot. "The only place in the Universe where science-fiction, weird, and fantasy stories are still written, published, and read!"

"Is that true? How about the Fen of EGOBOO?"

The pilot regarded him pityingly. "They're just *Fen*! They neither write nor read the stuff—they *live* it! In fact, nobody has ever been *permitted* to write anything, except what the ruling Verminn has liked to read. Since no Verminn ever liked anything he read, and since the Verminn line admits its failure at writing fiction; naturally, nothing of the kind has been either written or read in the World of EGOBOO. Hop out, now, and meet the people!"

\* \* \* \*

Myra Futurewoman was the most beautiful creature the Time Traveler had ever seen. Editor of *Weird Yarns Science-Fantasy Magazine* in this extravagant era, her position as Mayoress of Fantasia was tantamount to a queenship over the little band of hardy Radicals.

The Time Traveler's interview took place in the Mayoress' office, far above the gently murmuring city into which the pilot and the official airport greeters had conducted him.

"I used to be a Heroine in the upper world," Myra smiled pensively, "but I tired of the continual pursuit of the Heroes. They *are* such wooden sticks! Moreover, I felt that surely there was a more real purpose in life than wearing a Zapp gun as almost my only garment (*had* to, you see), and making myself glamorous for annual Cover Girl Day, so I gave up and joined the Radicals."

"I understand," commented the Time Traveler, "that Verminn the First systematically eradicated every protagonist of weird and fantasy literature."

"Of course," agreed Myra, "though some escaped to join the Radicals underground; and others, to be sure, were destroyed, in the H-blasts. Oliver Snardvark, publisher of Baconship Classics, was, on the other hand, captured and made to eat an entire press run of his latest weird opus, hard covers included. 'Since Snardvark has no taste at all,' Verminn commented, 'he can easily swallow his own words without discomfort.' This turned out to be not entirely true.

"Roy Fistfiller, quondam editor of *Emulsifying Stories* and a magazine called *Ultra Planets* was detected while illegally instructing a kindergarten class in the rudiments of Fistfiller's own brand of pseudoscience. Dick Q. Razorblade, who was present and holding the



Great Editor's hat at the time, barely had time to whimper, 'The Deros are coming!' when the H-bomb went off, destroying them both, along with the class of children and seven and a half million other citizens for a hundred miles around. 'I did it for the good of Fandom,' Verminn proclaimed afterwards. 'Why should anybody who would listen to crud like that, get a chance to grow up?' When it was pointed out to him that the other seven and a half million citizens had never heard of Fistfiller or of Razorblade's fanciful 'Cabins in the Sky', Verminn merely shrugged and remarked that they probably were only readers of the *Wednesday Morning Journal* anyway."

"Did he *never* know when to stop?"

"Never!" sighed Myra. "He even attacked the dead! Q. R. Sexcraft, late author of weird stories, he abused by destroying all copies of his works with pseudoscientific Z-rays. 'Cthulhu my left foot!' the tyrant grumbled as they burned. As for the long-defunct Egrallun Poo, Verminn not only burned his books but, decreed as well that thenceforth theatre patrons would have to shift for themselves in the matter of finding seats and further, he caused the word 'usher' to be struck from the dictionary."

"Didn't Verminn like anybody at all?"

"Well, *he did* demonstrate a predilection for a fan columnist called Bedd Buggs. It turned out, of course that Buggs was just a synonym for Swampwaterr."

"You meant to say, 'pseudonym'," the Time Traveler interposed gracefully.

"If I did," returned Myra, "it's the first time I ever made *that* mistake!"

"Oh," said the Time Traveler. "Well, tell me—can the Pseudos, or you Fantasiatics, travel in Time?"

A frown furrowed the brow of the alabaster maid.

"The pseudoscientific potentialities of time traveling have not been fully evaluated, owing to certain peculiarities inherent in the Pseudoscientific Principle. Travel into the Past is limited to the beginning of the Pseudoscientific Era. We cannot travel at all into the Future."

The Time Traveler sat bolt upright, then slowly relaxed. A faint smile hovered about his firm mouth.

"Then I *shall* succeed!" he murmured.

"Succeed at what?" queried Myra.

"*At destroying this Universe!*"

Myra stared at him, eyes wide in fascination, as the color ebbed slowly from her cheeks.

"*You are mad!*" she whispered at last. "No one—not even in science-fiction!—has ever *dreamed* of destroying the entire Universe!"

“Henry Kuttner did!” returned the Time Traveler.

“*Saint Henry!*” cried Myra in reverent awe.

“Yes—in *The Time Axis*, Kuttner not only destroyed the Universe, but he rebuilt it into two totally new Universes! *I*, however, shall not rebuild what I shall destroy!”

For some time, a murmur had been rising from the level of the street below; and now the outcry rose to such volume that the Time Traveler repaired hastily to the window. At that moment, a man stumbled into the room, blood flowing from a nasty wound in his head. His features were drawn and haggard. He gasped as he spoke.

“The Pseudos! They are running amuck all through the city, killing and burning everywhere!”

Myra was on her feet, her great big beautiful eyes wide, violet pools of terror.

“The end we have expected for centuries! How—*how* could they have got past our patrols?”

“*Earth-borer!*” gasped the Fantasiatic, staggering. “They built a monstrous earth-borer and bored through from the other side of the Earth! They came out of the ground in the heart of the city and caught us by surprise!”

“How are we holding?” whispered the beautiful Mayoress. “Have we a chance?”

The wounded man drooped. A glazed look had come into his eyes. He shook his head with an effort. “Alas—all is lost! They are even now inside this building!”

And he dropped stone cold dead at the feet of Myra and the Time Traveler.

The Time Traveler’s disaster-sharpened senses caught the thudding of heavy space-boots on the stairs and the spiteful snarl of Zapp guns spitting death and hatred.

“Quickly!” he cried. “There is not a moment to lose! Where in the Universe are the headquarters of Vermilionn Swampwaterr? We must go there at once!”

“Here on EGOBOO,” replied Myra, wringing her hands in true Heroine fashion. “But how? The enemy is almost at the door. Not even pseudoscience can save us!”

“But yes!” answered the Time Traveler with assurance. “I have read every science-fiction story ever written, and hence am a master pseudoscientist! Can you torkle?”

“No,” returned the maid of EGOBOO.

“No matter. I can torkle sufficiently for the two of us. Give me your hand, and let us torkle directly into the quarters of Vermilionn Swampwaterr...like this—!”

He took her hand as the vanguard of screaming, bloodthirsty

minions of pseudoscience burst in; and the two together vanished like a piece of type dropped inadvertently into the wrong box!

\* \* \* \* \*

"Grab those people!" yelled the Prime Pseudoscientist. "How did they get in here? I won't have it, I say! *I* know what I like, and one thing I *don't* like is strange people suddenly coming in out of nowhere! It makes me nervous! Woo! Gosh!"

As green-uniformed guardsmen rushed upon the pair, ugly blasters leveled, the Time Traveler quietly raised his hand in an imperious gesture. His kingly features bore a look of supreme majesty that brought the thundering guardsmen to a confused halt.

"Hold!" he murmured in a tone of iron determination.

The Prime Pseudoscientist, a wizened little caricature of a human being, crouched like a spider crab (*Macrocheira kampferi*) behind his desk, claws outspread over a complex arrangement of studs and push-buttons.

"I've got you covered with a Foo Ray!" he yelled. "What are you doing here? *Woo!*"

"At the moment," replied the Time Traveler, idly buffing his nails on his coat sleeve, "nothing." He fixed Vermillionn Swampwaterr XCVI with a glance of scorn. "I carry in my pocket a small flask of hydrogen gas. The ionization property of your Foo Ray will affect the phlogiston and set up a transmissory effect between the physical element of the gas and the pseudoscientific crappistance of your engrammatic personality, retrogressive in the nature of its fulmination; which, heterodyned upon the multimillimetric wavelength of the tortus quanta, will remove me instantaneously to the safety of hyper space. At the same time, you and your odious World of EGOBOO will disintegrate into flinders from the liberated clevis force of the hydrogen atoms now circulating quietly in my coat pocket!"

"Who *are* you?" asked the Prime Pseudoscientist greily.

"I am a Time Traveler—time machine style."

"I know my pseudoscience!" screeched Verminn XCVI. "No machine can travel ahead of its time-point of origin!"

"Did you try frumistating the corpiscon with the stupidor at half ablato?... Then you turn the branistan on the frumistat, and you swivitakel!"

Verminn XCVI looked at him in amazement.

"That's *right!* Our pseudoscientists have endeavored for ages to frumistate the corpiscon! How *do* you do it?"

"Grattle the slives and torkle through the ifflewhich," replied the Time Traveler. "It's as simple as snerling off a crumistan!"

The great ghod Verminn clenched his fists and gave a snort of

fiendish glee. “Now that I know how it is done,” cried he, “I shall send my minions back to the beginning of Time and start my Pseudoscientific Era from there! *Semper pseudoscientia egobooensis!* As soon as that has been accomplished, *you* will cease to exist; Mr. Time Traveler; for you and your Time will never have been!”

“*Heh-heh!*” snickered the Time Traveler politely.

“What are you giggling at?” growled the ninety-sixth generation descendant of the original Swampwaterr. Like his far progenitor, this Verminn could not bear another’s amusement in something beyond his own comprehension.

The Time Traveler drew Myra more closely to his side for the comfort her presence gave him.

“What do you know about the first Verminn?” asked he.

“As recorded on the History Tapes,” retorted Vermilionn Swampwaterr, little eyes blazing, “he founded in 1960, Dark Ages reckoning, the Pseudoscientific Era and the World of EGOBOO!”

“What did he do *before* 1960?”

The Prime Pseudoscientist shook his head.

“I will tell you,” spoke the Time Traveler firmly. “Turn on your Intergalactic Instantaneous Visi-Space-o Phone, so that all the teeming billions of Fen—every last Fan in Fandom!—can hear my words. I am about to tell you the *truth* about your World of EGOBOO!”

“No!” Verminn spoke shortly. “I am the only one of any importance in Fandom. You can speak your piece to me—if you think I will listen.”

“Turn it on, I say!” thundered the Time Traveler. “Or I will frerogate the staniscope!”

He felt Myra tremble in the hollow of his arm. The Prime Pseudoscientist paled. Grudgingly, he manipulated a stud. This room was now the focus of attention of billions of worlds circling myriad upon myriad of suns. All in this Universe of Fen responded instantaneously to this visi-call from the great ghod, Vermilionn Swampwaterr XCVI!... The Time Traveler felt in his brain the enormous psychic pressure of their unified attention—the monotonous *beat, beat, beat* of their eager curiosity, replying to this unheard of call, as every brain in the Universe strained itself to wonder what was going on.

“Is it not correct,” intoned the Time Traveler, “that you Fen know nothing at all about Verminn the First prior to his invention of the pseudoscientific H-bomb?”

An all-pervading wave of force gripped and tore at the very fiber of Space, as billions upon quadrupled billions of pseudoscientific heads nodded simultaneously upon their pseudoscientific necks in confirmation.

“You do not know,” continued the Time Traveler, and his voice rose to a sonorous pitch and volume, “that Verminn the First was only an imagined reflection of a comic strip Buck Rogers, a perfunctory zealot of a scribe, a fellow who doodled with a typewriter, and who derived an egoboost from the practice of panning kindly, middle-aged ladies more! widely read than he, from ribbing high school youngsters who were more intelligent than he thought permissible; and from backbiting professional editors and publishers, whom he considered less able than himself to pursue their various professions? Exponent of a certain raucous type of yellow journalism exhumed from the musty newsprints of a century before his time, this poor man’s bibliocommentator and reviler of editorial aspiration resented the intrusion of new fans into the fandom which he personified as himself. He *thought* he was fandom—and *you*, Verminn XCVI, *are* Fandom in the Fortieth Century!”

“Yes I *am* Fandom!” spat the Prime Pseudoscientist. “Through the centuries, the race of Verminn has succeeded in stamping out that futile tribe, the fan publishers, and have eradicated the pros. *My* foozine is the *only* foo-zine published today. Every Fan *has* to read it, or he gets zapped! *Hyak-yak-yak-yak!*”

A sigh coursed through the listening Universe and seemed almost to make itself heard in the room. Billions of hurtling suns blazed in the chill depths of Space, pale mauve, green, purple, sapphire, red, and with pearly luminescence. Super-billions of inhabited worlds revolved in their orbits, and the Universe hung breathless on the heels of that transcendental sigh.

“Did you ever hear of the fanzine, *Time-Trap*?” asked the Time Traveler spiritedly.

“*The Lost Codex!*” whispered the Prime Pseudoscientist in complete awe. “*The Great Foozine of the Ancients!*”

The Time Traveler drew a sheaf of mimeographed paper from his pocket and held it up before the Intergalactic Instantaneous Visi-Space-o-Phone tele-panel. Every eye in the Universe beheld the holy, arcane vehicle of ancient fan writing.

“*Time-Trap!*” solemnly spoke the Time Traveler. “The instrument on which I swear the pseudoscientific truth of what I am about to tell you!”

Sweat popped out all over Vermillion Swampwaterr’s face. He groaned aloud.

“Go ’way! You’re giving me engrams!”

The Time Traveler smiled with bored detachment.

“Engrams—shmengrams—who cares? Try this on your engrams—you *do not even exist!*”

The stars stood still in their courses. Wheeling planets paused a

breathless instant in their eternal gyrations. The fabric of Space trembled.

"The reason you cannot travel into the Past before the beginning of your Era," continued the Time Traveler inexorably, "is that you have no Past to travel to! You cannot travel into the Future, because you have no Future! You are merely One of the Wheels of If, and I am going to destroy you, to save the human race from even the remote probability of this highly undesirable end to its aspirations! By destroying the probability, I insure that the reality shall never exist. The truth is that the entire warp and woof of your mighty Pseudoscientific Era is nothing more than a concept, an aberrated mental projection of the puerile mind of Vermilionn Swampwaterr, the First, Last, and *Only* Verminn ever to exist!"

"Lies!" husked the Prime Pseudoscientist. "All lies!"

"On the contrary, retorted the Time Traveler coldly, "it is simple; pseudoscientific truth! In this issue of *Time Trap* is bound the promise of your dissolution!"

He paused and continued. "The first Verminn was accustomed to receive free in the mail simples of current fanzines, which he dissected in his writings, excoriated, sneered at, trampled upon, frothed at, and in other ways made of himself a figure of ludicrous and bitter envy. Affairs got to the point where new faneditors refused to send him their 'zines free. Either unable or unwilling to pay for what he thought he should get for nothing, Verminn cunningly conceived a plan! He dug out a moth-eaten back-issue of his own mimeographed mutterings and mailed it to the new faneditor. That fellow, embarrassed, replied then in kind and mailed to Verminn his own effort, only to see it suffer the venting of that creature's monomania... One day, a new faneditor, shortly after his second issue, received an ancient, dilapidated fanzine in the mail. There was no doubt that it was published by Vermilionn Swampwaterr, for his name was all over the thing. Moreover, he mentioned himself at least ten times on every page, in the form of the first person perpendicular pronoun. The new editor took a copy of his own 'zine, carefully sprinkled the pages with roach rid, a kralsis of the sensiform, and mailed it to Verminn. When the 'zine arrived, Verminn seized it with greedy little eyes alight. He went through the pages in an oestrus of glee, licking his thumb the better to flip the pliant paper! And then, sir, the roach rid (harmless to man or beast, it said on the box) took effect. *Framistance! Donnerwetter!* Vermilion Swampwaterr abruptly stiffened and quickly fell down...extinct! He never lived to found the Pseudoscientific Era. News of his demise is reported in this issue of the fanzine, *Time-Trap!*"

He tossed the mimeographed sheets upon the Prime Pseudo scientist's desk. Verminn XCVI licked his lips.

"It says here," he mumbled suspiciously, "that he died of cause unknown. Where do you get that snuff about the fan editor and the roach rid?"

"I, sir," said the Time Traveler modestly, "am that fan editor. I tired of Verminn's 'git out o' town by sundown' attitude and his continual gum-beating. The deed baffled scientific crime detectors, because it was consummated along pseudoscientific principles, based on the hypothesis that Vermillion Swampwaterr was neither man nor beast, but an insect!"

"I don't believe it!" cried Verminn XCVI, "But, I *must* believe it—it is so soundly pseudoscientific!"

Belief controlled, him, Throughout the vast, star-burdened reaches of the Pseudoscientific Universe, the legionary quadrillions of Fen quivered with the nascent throes of dissolution. Space twisted, warped. Mighty goutts of energy clawed at giant suns, and they flared into a frenzy of incandescence and abruptly winked out in the cold night of Nothingness. The roiling worlds of the Pseudoscientific Universe reeled, staggered, fragmented, and ceased to exist. The Time Traveler felt the floor shudder and heave under his feet.

Far away, there was a sound as of a giant wind, a rushing sibilancy of entropic energy flow.

The Prime Pseudoscientist vainly tried to pull him-self erect, but the big desk was melting and running under his hands. The green-garbed guardsmen staggered, their faces suddenly become gluey and awry. They were melting like so many wax candles in a fire.

The Time Traveler smiled frostily, held Myra close and did what he had to do to materialize the time machine. He hurled the stumbling girl inside, leaped in after her, and at once frumistanned the branistat, which process nullified the force that had statified him in this macabre era and transported them safely into hyper space. The Time Traveler halted the machine and gazed at the ex-Heroine with admiring eyes.

"You bore up splendidly!" said he. "For a minute, I was afraid..." He shook his head.

The girl was white of face, and her eyes were deep pools of violet that mirrored perplexity and fear.

"Whahoppen?" she cried in the vernacular. "All of a sudden, everything began to blur and spin around me—" She passed a hand across her forehead.

"Very simple, my dear," smiled the Time Traveler. "When every Fan became convinced he did not exist, he simply did not, that is all. The principle of it is a soundly pseudoscientific one!"

Myra frowned. "Since Verminn did not create the world of EGOBOO in real time—how is it that *I* still exist?"

“Because,” grinned the Time Traveler, “I got you into hyper space quickly enough. Further, Vermilionn Swampwaterr still lives in my time sector. You see, I kind of fibbed to the Prime Pseudoscientist and the ultimate Fen. Verminn did *not* ingest roach poison! I am like most fen of my time, who believe in the maxim: Live and let live. Yet, so long as there is a Swampwaterr type, and petty sycophants to cheer his paranoiac delusions, human beings will be maligned for their beliefs, their position, or their color—and even for an attribute so trivial as taste in reading matter, or how one spends one’s money!... Still, there is yet room in fandom for all aspects of controversy—for all factions—even for the Swampwaterr, if such a one can be persuaded to mitigate the derisive braying of his own personal opinions to the more prudent level of thoughtful and seemly disquisition, meriting some measure of attention. A hue, cry, and raillery, merely to be different, cannot earn for its instigator other than the full contempt of his audience. Therefore, I would advise a potential Swampwaterr, that a change of behavior is in order; for surely, to fly with intolerance in the face of good will and decent respect for the convictions of others, is to take the suicide route toward social extinction.”

“But how did you destroy the Universe?” asked Myra.

“The ultimate Fen,” explained the Time Traveler, “believed anything couched in the jargon of pseudoscientific double-talk. Further convinced by that forged copy of *Time-Trap*, they simply believed themselves out of existence. Froth as he may, Verminn will never re-create that particular probability!... And now, my dear, will you return to 1950 with me and help me edit my fanzine?”

“Yes, yes!” cried she, eyes shining. “What else?”

The Time Traveler grinned as he considered what else, thinking of orange blossoms. He branistanned the frumivalve, and laboratory walls swam out of the pearly mist that had theretofore surrounded them. At the same moment, the beautiful Myra grew pale and paler, thinned, wanned, and vanished quite away, still with a look of ethereal joy enhancing her goddess-like beauty.

The Time Traveler shrugged. “I was afraid she would do that,” he murmured. “As soon as she passed the time line of the Pseudoscientific Era, she had no existence, as she was only a figment of Vermilionn Swampwaterr’s projected future imagination. Well, she probably couldn’t cook, anyhow. I don’t suppose there are many science-fiction Heroines, other than Oona, who can!”



# THE LONG REMEMBERED THUNDER,

## by Keith Laumer

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### I

In his room at the Elsby Commercial Hotel, Tremaine opened his luggage and took out a small tool kit, used a screwdriver to remove the bottom cover plate from the telephone. He inserted a tiny aluminum cylinder, crimped wires and replaced the cover. Then he dialed a long-distance Washington number and waited half a minute for the connection.

"Fred, Tremaine here. Put the buzzer on." A thin hum sounded on the wire as the scrambler went into operation.

"Okay, can you read me all right? I'm set up in Elsby. Grammond's boys are supposed to keep me informed. Meantime, I'm not sitting in this damned room crouched over a dial. I'll be out and around for the rest of the afternoon."

"I want to see results," the thin voice came back over the filtered hum of the jamming device. "You spent a week with Grammond—I can't wait another. I don't mind telling you certain quarters are pressing me."

"Fred, when will you learn to sit on your news breaks until you've got some answers to go with the questions?"

"I'm an appointive official," Fred said sharply. "But never mind that. This fellow Margrave—General Margrave. Project Officer for the hyperwave program—he's been on my neck day and night. I can't say I blame him. An unauthorized transmitter interfering with a Top Secret project, progress slowing to a halt, and this Bureau—"

"Look, Fred. I was happy in the lab. Headaches, nightmares and all. Hyperwave is my baby, remember? You elected me to be a leg-man: now let me do it my way."

"I felt a technical man might succeed where a trained investigator could be misled. And since it seems to be pinpointed in your home area—"

"You don't have to justify yourself. Just don't hold out on me. I sometimes wonder if I've seen the complete files on this—"

"You've seen all the files! Now I want answers, not questions! I'm warning you, Tremaine. Get that transmitter. I need someone to hang!"

Tremaine left the hotel, walked two blocks west along Commerce Street and turned in at a yellow brick building with the words ELSBY MUNICIPAL POLICE cut in the stone lintel above the door. Inside, a heavy man with a creased face and thick gray hair looked up from behind an ancient Underwood. He studied Tremaine, shifted a toothpick to the opposite corner of his mouth.

"Don't I know you, mister?" he said. His soft voice carried a note of authority.

Tremaine took off his hat. "Sure you do, Jess. It's been a while, though."

The policeman got to his feet. "Jimmy," he said, "Jimmy Tremaine." He came to the counter and put out his hand. "How are you, Jimmy? What brings you back to the boondocks?"

"Let's go somewhere and sit down, Jess."

In a back room Tremaine said, "To everybody but you this is just a visit to the old home town. Between us, there's more."

Jess nodded. "I heard you were with the gov'ment."

"It won't take long to tell; we don't know much yet." Tremaine covered the discovery of the powerful unidentified interference on the high-security hyperwave band, the discovery that each transmission produced not one but a pattern of "fixes" on the point of origin. He passed a sheet of paper across the table. It showed a set of concentric circles, overlapped by a similar group of rings.

"I think what we're getting is an echo effect from each of these points of intersection. The rings themselves represent the diffraction pattern—"

"Hold it, Jimmy. To me it just looks like a beer ad. I'll take your word for it."

"The point is this, Jess: we think we've got it narrowed down to this section. I'm not sure of a damn thing, but I think that transmitter's near here. Now, have you got any ideas?"

"That's a tough one, Jimmy. This is where I should come up with the news that Old Man Whatchamacallit's got an attic full of gear he says is a time machine. Trouble is, folks around here haven't even taken to TV. They figure we should be content with radio, like the Lord intended."

"I didn't expect any easy answers, Jess. But I was hoping maybe you had something..."

"Course," said Jess, "there's always Mr. Bram..."

"Mr. Bram," repeated Tremaine. "Is he still around? I remember him as a hundred years old when I was kid."

"Still just the same, Jimmy. Comes in town maybe once a week, buys his groceries and hikes back out to his place by the river."

"Well, what about him?"

"Nothing. But he's the town's mystery man. You know that. A little touched in the head."

"There were a lot of funny stories about him, I remember," Tremaine said. "I always liked him. One time he tried to teach me something I've forgotten. Wanted me to come out to his place and he'd teach me. I never did go. We kids used to play in the caves near his place, and sometimes he gave us apples."

\* \* \* \*

"I've never seen any harm in Bram," said Jess. "But you know how this town is about foreigners, especially when they're a mite addled. Bram has blue eyes and blond hair—or did before it turned white—and he talks just like everybody else. From a distance he seems just like an ordinary American. But up close, you feel it. He's foreign, all right. But we never did know where he came from."

"How long's he lived here in Elsby?"

"Beats me, Jimmy. You remember old Aunt Tress, used to know all about ancestors and such as that? She couldn't remember about Mr. Bram. She was kind of senile, I guess. She used to say he'd lived in that same old place out on the Concord road when she was a girl. Well, she died five years ago...in her seventies. He still walks in town every Wednesday...or he did up till yesterday anyway."

"Oh?" Tremaine stubbed out his cigarette, lit another. "What happened then?"

"You remember Soup Gaskin? He's got a boy, name of Hull. He's Soup all over again."

"I remember Soup," Tremaine said. "He and his bunch used to come in the drug store where I worked and perch on the stools and kid around with me, and Mr. Hempleman would watch them from over back of the prescription counter and look nervous. They used to raise Cain in the other drug store...."

"Soup's been in the pen since then. His boy Hull's the same kind. Him and a bunch of his pals went out to Bram's place one night and set it on fire."

"What was the idea of that?"

"Dunno. Just meanness, I reckon. Not much damage done. A car was passing by and called it in. I had the whole caboodle locked up here for six hours. Then the sob sisters went to work: poor little tyke routine, high spirits, you know the line. All of 'em but Hull are back in the streets playin' with matches by now. I'm waiting for the day they'll make jail age."

"Why Bram?" Tremaine persisted. "As far as I know, he never had any dealings to speak of with anybody here in town."

"Oh hoh, you're a little young, Jimmy," Jess chuckled. "You never

knew about Mr. Bram—the young Mr. Bram—and Linda Carroll.”

Tremaine shook his head.

“Old Miss Carroll. School teacher here for years; guess she was retired by the time you were playing hookey. But her dad had money, and in her day she was a beauty. Too good for the fellers in these parts. I remember her ridin by in a high-wheeled shay, when I was just a nipper. Sitting up proud and tall, with that red hair piled up high. I used to think she was some kind of princess....”

“What about her and Bram? A romance?”

\* \* \* \*

Jess rocked his chair back on two legs, looked at the ceiling, frowning. “This would ha’ been about nineteen-oh-one. I was no more’n eight years old. Miss Linda was maybe in her twenties—and that made her an old maid, in those times. The word got out she was setting her cap for Bram. He was a good-looking young feller then, over six foot, of course, broad backed, curly yellow hair—and a stranger to boot. Like I said, Linda Carroll wanted nothin to do with the local bucks. There was a big shindy planned. Now, you know Bram was funny about any kind of socializing; never would go any place at night. But this was a Sunday afternoon and someways or other they got Bram down there; and Miss Linda made her play, right there in front of the town, practically. Just before sundown they went off together in that fancy shay. And the next day, she was home again—alone. That finished off her reputation, as far as the biddies in Elsby was concerned. It was ten years ’fore she even landed the teaching job. By that time, she was already old. And nobody was ever fool enough to mention the name Bram in front of her.”

Tremaine got to his feet. “I’d appreciate it if you’d keep your ears and eyes open for anything that might build into a lead on this, Jess. Meantime, I’m just a tourist, seeing the sights.”

“What about that gear of yours? Didn’t you say you had some kind of detector you were going to set up?”

“I’ve got an oversized suitcase,” Tremaine said. “I’ll be setting it up in my room over at the hotel.”

“When’s this bootleg station supposed to broadcast again?”

“After dark. I’m working on a few ideas. It might be an infinitely repeating logarithmic sequence, based on—”

“Hold it, Jimmy. You’re over my head.” Jess got to his feet. “Let me know if you want anything. And by the way—” he winked broadly —“I always did know who busted Soup Gaskin’s nose and took out his front teeth.”

Back in the street, Tremaine headed south toward the Elsby Town Hall, a squat structure of brownish-red brick, crouched under yellow autumn trees at the end of Sheridan Street. Tremaine went up the steps and past heavy double doors. Ten yards along the dim corridor, a hand-lettered cardboard sign over a black-varnished door said "MUNICIPAL OFFICE OF RECORD." Tremaine opened the door and went in.

A thin man with garters above the elbow looked over his shoulder at Tremaine.

"We're closed," he said.

"I won't be a minute," Tremaine said. "Just want to check on when the Bram property changed hands last."

The man turned to Tremaine, pushing a drawer shut with his hip. "Bram? He dead?"

"Nothing like that. I just want to know when he bought the place."

The man came over to the counter, eyeing Tremaine. "He ain't going to sell, mister, if that's what you want to know."

"I want to know when he bought."

The man hesitated, closed his jaw hard. "Come back tomorrow," he said.

Tremaine put a hand on the counter, looked thoughtful. "I was hoping to save a trip." He lifted his hand and scratched the side of his jaw. A folded bill opened on the counter. The thin man's eyes darted toward it. His hand eased out, covered the bill. He grinned quickly.

"See what I can do," he said.

It was ten minutes before he beckoned Tremaine over to the table where a two-foot-square book lay open. An untrimmed fingernail indicated a line written in faded ink:

May 19. Acreage sold, One Dollar and other G&V consid.  
NW Quarter Section 24, Township Elsby. Bram. (see Vol. 9 &  
cet.)

"Translated, what does that mean?" said Tremaine.

"That's the ledger for 1901; means Bram bought a quarter section on the nineteenth of May. You want me to look up the deed?"

"No, thanks," Tremaine said. "That's all I needed." He turned back to the door.

"What's up, mister?" the clerk called after him. "Bram in some kind of trouble?"

"No. No trouble."

The man was looking at the book with pursed lips. "Nineteen-oh-one," he said. "I never thought of it before, but you know, old Bram must be dern near to ninety years old. Spry for that age."

"I guess you're right."

The clerk looked sideways at Tremaine. "Lots of funny stories about old Bram. Useta say his place was haunted. You know; funny noises and lights. And they used to say there was money buried out at his place."

"I've heard those stories. Just superstition, wouldn't you say?"

"Maybe so." The clerk leaned on the counter, assumed a knowing look. "There's one story that's not superstition...."

Tremaine waited.

"You—uh—paying anything for information?"

"Now why would I do that?" Tremaine reached for the door knob.

The clerk shrugged. "Thought I'd ask. Anyway—I can swear to this. Nobody in this town's ever seen Bram between sundown and sunup."

\* \* \* \*

Untrimmed sumacs threw late-afternoon shadows on the discolored stucco facade of the Elsby Public Library. Inside, Tremaine followed a paper-dry woman of indeterminate age to a rack of yellowed newsprint.

"You'll find back to nineteen-forty here," the librarian said. "The older are there in the shelves."

"I want nineteen-oh-one, if they go back that far."

The woman darted a suspicious look at Tremaine. "You have to handle these old papers carefully."

"I'll be extremely careful." The woman sniffed, opened a drawer, leafed through it, muttering.

"What date was it you wanted?"

"Nineteen-oh-one; the week of May nineteenth."

The librarian pulled out a folded paper, placed it on the table, adjusted her glasses, squinted at the front page. "That's it," she said. "These papers keep pretty well, provided they're stored in the dark. But they're still flimsy, mind you."

"I'll remember." The woman stood by as Tremaine looked over the front page. The lead article concerned the opening of the Pan-American Exposition at Buffalo. Vice-President Roosevelt had made a speech. Tremaine leafed over, reading slowly.

On page four, under a column headed *County Notes* he saw the name Bram:

Mr. Bram has purchased a quarter section of fine grazing land, north of town, together with a sturdy house, from J. P. Spivey of Elsby. Mr. Bram will occupy the home and will continue to graze a few head of stock. Mr. Bram, who is a newcomer to the county, has been a resident of Mrs. Storate's Guest Home in Elsby for the past months.

“May I see some earlier issues; from about the first of the year?”

The librarian produced the papers. Tremaine turned the pages, read the heads, skimmed an article here and there. The librarian went back to her desk. An hour later, in the issue for July 7, 1900, an item caught his eye:

A Severe Thunderstorm. Citizens of Elsby and the country were much alarmed by a violent cloudburst, accompanied by lightning and thunder, during the night of the fifth. A fire set in the pine woods north of Spivey's farm destroyed a considerable amount of timber and threatened the house before burning itself out along the river.

The librarian was at Tremaine's side. “I have to close the library now. You'll have to come back tomorrow.”

Outside, the sky was fallow in the west: lights were coming on in windows along the side streets. Tremaine turned up his collar against a cold wind that had risen, started along the street toward the hotel.

A block away a black late-model sedan rounded a corner with a faint squeal of tires and gunned past him, a heavy antenna mounted forward of the left rear tail fin whipping in the slipstream. Tremaine stopped short, stared after the car.

“Damn!” he said aloud. An elderly man veered, eyeing him sharply. Tremaine set off at a run, covered the two blocks to the hotel, yanked open the door to his car, slid into the seat, made a U-turn, and headed north after the police car.

\* \* \* \*

Two miles into the dark hills north of the Elsby city limits, Tremaine rounded a curve. The police car was parked on the shoulder beside the highway just ahead. He pulled off the road ahead of it and walked back. The door opened. A tall figure stepped out.

“What's your problem, mister?” a harsh voice drawled.

“What's the matter? Run out of signal?”

“What's it to you, mister?”

“Are you boys in touch with Grammond on the car set?”

“We could be.”

“Mind if I have a word with him? My name's Tremaine.”

“Oh,” said the cop, “you're the big shot from Washington.” He shifted chewing tobacco to the other side of his jaw. “Sure, you can talk to him.” He turned and spoke to the other cop, who muttered into the mike before handing it to Tremaine.

The heavy voice of the State Police chief crackled. “What's your beef, Tremaine?”

“I thought you were going to keep your men away from Elsby until

I gave the word, Grammond.”

“That was before I knew your Washington stuffed shirts were holding out on me.”

“It’s nothing we can go to court with, Grammond. And the job you were doing might have been influenced if I’d told you about the Elsbey angle.”

Grammond cursed. “I could have put my men in the town and taken it apart brick by brick in the time—”

“That’s just what I don’t want. If our bird sees cops cruising, he’ll go underground.”

“You’ve got it all figured, I see. I’m just the dumb hick you boys use for the spade work, that it?”

“Pull your lip back in. You’ve given me the confirmation I needed.”

“Confirmation, hell! All I know is that somebody somewhere is punching out a signal. For all I know, it’s forty midgets on bicycles, pedalling all over the damned state. I’ve got fixes in every county—”

“The smallest hyperwave transmitter Uncle Sam knows how to build weighs three tons,” said Tremaine. “Bicycles are out.”

Grammond snorted. “Okay, Tremaine,” he said. “You’re the boy with all the answers. But if you get in trouble, don’t call me; call Washington.”

\* \* \* \*

Back in his room, Tremaine put through a call.

“It looks like Grammond’s not willing to be left out in the cold, Fred. Tell him if he queers this—”

“I don’t know but what he might have something,” the voice came back over the filtered hum. “Suppose he smokes them out—”

“Don’t go dumb on me, Fred. We’re not dealing with West Virginia moonshiners.”

“Don’t tell me my job, Tremaine!” the voice snapped. “And don’t try out your famous temper on me. I’m still in charge of this investigation.”

“Sure. Just don’t get stuck in some senator’s hip pocket.” Tremaine hung up the telephone, went to the dresser and poured two fingers of Scotch into a water glass. He tossed it down, then pulled on his coat and left the hotel.

He walked south two blocks, turned left down a twilit side street. He walked slowly, looking at the weathered frame houses. Number 89 was a once-stately three-storied mansion overgrown with untrimmed vines, its windows squares of sad yellow light. He pushed through the gate in the ancient picket fence, mounted the porch steps and pushed the button beside the door, a dark panel of cracked varnish. It was a long minute before the door opened. A tall woman with white hair



and a fine-boned face looked at him coolly.

"Miss Carroll," Tremaine said. "You won't remember me, but I—"

"There is nothing whatever wrong with my faculties, James," Miss Carroll said calmly. Her voice was still resonant, a deep contralto. Only a faint quaver reflected her age—close to eighty, Tremaine thought, startled.

"I'm flattered you remember me, Miss Carroll," he said.

"Come in." She led the way to a pleasant parlor set out with the furnishings of another era. She motioned Tremaine to a seat and took a straight chair across the room from him.

"You look very well, James," she said, nodding. "I'm pleased to see that you've amounted to something."

"Just another bureaucrat, I'm afraid."

"You were wise to leave Elsby. There is no future here for a young man."

"I often wondered why you didn't leave, Miss Carroll. I thought, even as a boy, that you were a woman of great ability."

"Why did you come today, James?" asked Miss Carroll.

"I..." Tremaine started. He looked at the old lady. "I want some information. This is an important matter. May I rely on your discretion?"

"Of course."

"How long has Mr. Bram lived in Elsby?"

Miss Carroll looked at him for a long moment. "Will what I tell you be used against him?"

"There'll be nothing done against him, Miss Carroll...unless it needs to be in the national interest."

"I'm not at all sure I know what the term 'national interest' means, James. I distrust these glib phrases."

"I always liked Mr. Bram," said Tremaine. "I'm not out to hurt him."

"Mr. Bram came here when I was a young woman. I'm not certain of the year."

"What does he do for a living?"

"I have no idea."

"Why did a healthy young fellow like Bram settle out in that isolated piece of country? What's his story?"

"I'm...not sure that anyone truly knows Bram's story."

"You called him 'Bram', Miss Carroll. Is that his first name...or his last?"

"That is his only name. Just...Bram."

"You knew him well once, Miss Carroll. Is there anything—"

A tear rolled down Miss Carroll's faded cheek. She wiped it away impatiently.

"I'm an unfulfilled old maid, James," she said. "You must forgive me."

Tremaine stood up. "I'm sorry. Really sorry. I didn't mean to grill you. Miss Carroll. You've been very kind. I had no right...."

Miss Carroll shook her head. "I knew you as a boy, James. I have complete confidence in you. If anything I can tell you about Bram will be helpful to you, it is my duty to oblige you; and it may help him." She paused. Tremaine waited.

"Many years ago I was courted by Bram. One day he asked me to go with him to his house. On the way he told me a terrible and pathetic tale. He said that each night he fought a battle with evil beings, alone, in a cave beneath his house."

Miss Carroll drew a deep breath and went on. "I was torn between pity and horror. I begged him to take me back. He refused." Miss Carroll twisted her fingers together, her eyes fixed on the long past. "When we reached the house, he ran to the kitchen. He lit a lamp and threw open a concealed panel. There were stairs. He went down...and left me there alone.

"I waited all that night in the carriage. At dawn he emerged. He tried to speak to me but I would not listen.

"He took a locket from his neck and put it into my hand. He told me to keep it and, if ever I should need him, to press it between my fingers in a secret way...and he would come. I told him that until he would consent to see a doctor, I did not wish him to call. He drove me home. He never called again."

"This locket," said Tremaine, "do you still have it?"

Miss Carroll hesitated, then put her hand to her throat, lifted a silver disc on a fine golden chain. "You see what a foolish old woman I am, James."

"May I see it?"

She handed the locket to him. It was heavy, smooth. "I'd like to examine this more closely," he said. "May I take it with me?"

Miss Carroll nodded.

"There is one other thing," she said, "perhaps quite meaningless. ..."

"I'd be grateful for any lead."

"Bram fears the thunder."

### III

As Tremaine walked slowly toward the lighted main street of Elsbay a car pulled to a stop beside him. Jess leaned out, peered at Tremaine and asked:

"Any luck, Jimmy?"

Tremaine shook his head. "I'm getting nowhere fast. The Bram

idea's a dud, I'm afraid."

"Funny thing about Bram. You know, he hasn't showed up yet. I'm getting a little worried. Want to run out there with me and take a look around?"

"Sure. Just so I'm back by full dark."

As they pulled away from the curb Jess said, "Jimmy, what's this about State Police nosing around here? I thought you were playing a lone hand from what you were saying to me."

"I thought so too, Jess. But it looks like Grammond's a jump ahead of me. He smells headlines in this; he doesn't want to be left out."

"Well, the State cops could be mighty handy to have around. I'm wondering why you don't want 'em in. If there's some kind of spy ring working—"

"We're up against an unknown quantity. I don't know what's behind this and neither does anybody else. Maybe it's a ring of Bolsheviks...and maybe it's something bigger. I have the feeling we've made enough mistakes in the last few years; I don't want to see this botched."

The last pink light of sunset was fading from the clouds to the west as Jess swung the car through the open gate, pulled up under the old trees before the square-built house. The windows were dark. The two men got out, circled the house once, then mounted the steps and rapped on the door. There was a black patch of charred flooring under the window, and the paint on the wall above it was bubbled. Somewhere a cricket set up a strident chirrup, suddenly cut off. Jess leaned down, picked up an empty shotgun shell. He looked at Tremaine. "This don't look good," he said. "You suppose those fool boys...?"

He tried the door. It opened. A broken hasp dangled. He turned to Tremaine. "Maybe this is more than kid stuff," he said. "You carry a gun?"

"In the car."

"Better get it."

Tremaine went to the car, dropped the pistol in his coat pocket, rejoined Jess inside the house. It was silent, deserted. In the kitchen Jess flicked the beam of his flashlight around the room. An empty plate lay on the oilcloth-covered table.

"This place is empty," he said. "Anybody'd think he'd been gone a week."

"Not a very cozy—" Tremaine broke off. A thin yelp sounded in the distance.

"I'm getting jumpy," said Jess. "Dern hounddog, I guess."

A low growl seemed to rumble distantly. "What the devil's that?" Tremaine said.

Jess shone the light on the floor. "Look here," he said. The ring of light showed a spatter of dark droplets all across the plank floor.

"That's blood, Jess...." Tremaine scanned the floor. It was of broad slabs, closely laid, scrubbed clean but for the dark stains.

"Maybe he cleaned a chicken. This is the kitchen."

"It's a trail." Tremaine followed the line of drops across the floor. It ended suddenly near the wall.

"What do you make of it. Jimmy?"

A wail sounded, a thin forlorn cry, trailing off into silence. Jess stared at Tremaine. "I'm too damned old to start believing in spooks," he said. "You suppose those damn-fool boys are hiding here, playing tricks?"

"I think." Tremaine said, "that we'd better go ask Hull Gaskin a few questions."

\* \* \* \*

At the station Jess led Tremaine to a cell where a lanky teen-age boy lounged on a steel-framed cot, blinking up at the visitor under a mop of greased hair.

"Hull, this is Mr. Tremaine," said Jess. He took out a heavy key, swung the cell door open. "He wants to talk to you."

"I ain't done nothin'," Hull said sullenly. "There ain't nothin' wrong with burnin' out a Commie, is there?"

"Bram's a Commie, is he?" Tremaine said softly. "How'd you find that out, Hull?"

"He's a foreigner, ain't he?" the youth shot back. "Besides, we heard...."

"What did you hear?"

"They're lookin' for the spies."

"Who's looking for spies?"

"Cops."

"Who says so?"

The boy looked directly at Tremaine for an instant, flicked his eyes to the corner of the cell. "Cops was talkin' about 'em," he said.

"Spill it, Hull," the policeman said. "Mr. Tremaine hasn't got all night."

"They parked out east of town, on 302, back of the woodlot. They called me over and asked me a bunch of questions. Said I could help 'em get them spies. Wanted to know all about any funny-actin' people around hers."

"And you mentioned Bram?"

The boy darted another look at Tremaine. "They said they figured the spies was out north of town. Well, Bram's a foreigner, and he's out that way, ain't he?"

“Anything else?”

The boy looked at his feet.

“What did you shoot at, Hull?” Tremaine said. The boy looked at him sullenly.

“You know anything about the blood on the kitchen floor?”

“I don’t know what you’re talkin about,” Hull said. “We was out squirrel-huntin.”

“Hull, is Mr. Bram dead?”

“What you mean?” Hull blurted. “He was—”

“He was what?”

“Nothin.”

“The Chief won’t like it if you hold out on him, Hull,” Tremaine said. “He’s bound to find out.”

Jess looked at the boy. “Hull’s a pretty dumb boy,” he said. “But he’s not that dumb. Let’s have it, Hull.”

The boy licked his lips. “I had Pa’s 30-30, and Bovey Lay had a twelve-gauge....”

“What time was this?”

“Just after sunset.”

“About seven-thirty, that’d be,” said Jess. “That was half an hour before the fire was spotted.”

“I didn’t do no shootin. It was Bovey. Old Bram jumped out at him, and he just fired off the hip. But he didn’t kill him. He seen him run off....”

“You were on the porch when this happened. Which way did Bram go?”

“He...run inside.”

“So then you set fire to the place. Whose bright idea was that?”

Hull sat silent. After a moment Tremaine and Jess left the cell.

“He must have gotten clear, Jimmy,” said Jess. “Maybe he got scared and left town.”

“Bram doesn’t strike me as the kind to panic.” Tremaine looked at his watch. “I’ve got to get on my way, Jess. I’ll check with you in the morning.”

Tremaine crossed the street to the Paradise Bar and Grill, pushed into the jukebox-lit interior, took a stool and ordered a Scotch and water. He sipped the drink, then sat staring into the dark reflection in the glass. The idea of a careful reconnoitre of the Elsby area was gone, now, with police swarming everywhere. It was too bad about Bram. It would be interesting to know where the old man was...and if he was still alive. He’d always seemed normal enough in the old days: a big solid-looking man, middle-aged, always pleasant enough, though he didn’t say much. He’d tried hard, that time, to interest Tremaine in learning whatever it was....

Tremaine put a hand in his jacket pocket, took out Miss Carroll's locket. It was smooth, the size and shape of a wrist-watch chassis. He was fingering it meditatively when a rough hand slammed against his shoulder, half knocking him from the stool. Tremaine caught his balance, turned, looked into the scarred face of a heavy-shouldered man in a leather jacket.

"I heard you was back in town, Tremaine," the man said.

The bartender moved up. "Looky here, Gaskin, I don't want no trouble—"

"Shove it!" Gaskin squinted at Tremaine, his upper lip curled back to expose the gap in his teeth. "You tryin to make more trouble for my boy, I hear. Been over to the jail, stickin your nose in."

Tremaine dropped the locket in his pocket and stood up. Gaskin hitched up his pants, glanced around the room. Half a dozen early drinkers stared, wide-eyed. Gaskin squinted at Tremaine. He smelled of unwashed flannel.

"Sicked the cops onto him. The boy was out with his friends, havin a little fun. Now there he sets in jail."

Tremaine moved aside from the stool, started past the man. Soup Gaskin grabbed his arm.

"Not so fast! I figger you owe me damages. I—"

"Damage is what you'll get," said Tremaine. He slammed a stiff left to Gaskin's ribs, drove a hard right to the jaw. Gaskin jack-knifed backwards, tripped over a bar stool, fell on his back. He rolled over, got to hands and knees, shook his head.

"Git up, Soup!" someone called. "Hot dog!" offered another.

"I'm calling the police!" the bartender yelled.

"Never mind," a voice said from the door. A blue-jacketed State Trooper strolled into the room, fingers hooked into his pistol belt, the steel caps on his boot heels clicking with each step. He faced Tremaine, feet apart.

"Looks like you're disturbin the peace, Mr. Tremaine," he said.

"You wouldn't know who put him up to it, would you?" Tremaine said.

"That's a dirty allegation," the cop grinned. "I'll have to get off a hot letter to my congressman."

Gaskin got to his feet, wiped a smear of blood across his cheek, then lunged past the cop and swung a wild right. Tremaine stepped aside, landed a solid punch on Gaskin's ear. The cop stepped back against the bar. Soup whirled, slammed out with lefts and rights. Tremaine lashed back with a straight left; Gaskin slammed against the bar, rebounded, threw a knockout right...and Tremaine ducked, landed a right upper-cut that sent Gaskin reeling back, bowled over a table, sent glasses flying. Tremaine stood over him.

"On your feet, jailbird," he said. "A workout is exactly what I needed."

"Okay, you've had your fun," the State cop said. "I'm taking you in, Tremaine."

Tremaine looked at him. "Sorry, copper," he said. "I don't have time right now." The cop looked startled, reached for his revolver.

"What's going on here, Jimmy?" Jess stood in the door, a huge .44 in his hand. He turned his eyes on the trooper.

"You're a little out of your jurisdiction," he said. "I think you better move on 'fore somebody steals your bicycle."

The cop eyed Jess for a long moment, then holstered his pistol and stalked out of the bar. Jess tucked his revolver into his belt, looked at Gaskin sitting on the floor, dabbing at his bleeding mouth. "What got into you, Soup?"

"I think the State boys put him up to it," Tremaine said. "They're looking for an excuse to take me out of the picture."

Jess motioned to Gaskin. "Get up, Soup. I'm lockin you up alongside that boy of yours."

Outside, Jess said, "You got some bad enemies there, Jimmy. That's a tough break. You ought to hold onto your temper with those boys. I think maybe you ought to think about getting over the state line. I can run you to the bus station, and send your car along..."

"I can't leave now, Jess. I haven't even started."

#### IV

In his room, Tremaine doctored the cut on his jaw, then opened his trunk, checked over the detector gear. The telephone rang.

"Tremaine? I've been on the telephone with Grammond. Are you out of your mind? I'm—"

"Fred," Tremaine cut in, "I thought you were going to get those state cops off my neck."

"Listen to me, Tremaine. You're called off this job as of now. Don't touch anything! You'd better stay right there in that room. In fact, that's an order!"

"Don't pick now to come apart at the seams, Fred," Tremaine snapped.

"I've ordered you off! That's all!" The phone clicked and the dial tone sounded. Tremaine dropped the receiver in its cradle, then walked to the window absently, his hand in his pocket.

He felt broken pieces and pulled out Miss Carroll's locket. It was smashed, split down the center. It must have gotten it in the tussle with Soup, Tremaine thought. It looked—

He squinted at the shattered ornament. A maze of fine wires was exposed, tiny condensers, bits of glass.

In the street below, tires screeched. Tremaine looked down. A black car was at the curb, doors sprung. Four uniformed men jumped out, headed for the door. Tremaine whirled to the phone. The desk clerk came on.

“Get me Jess—fast!”

The police chief answered.

“Jess, the word’s out I’m poison. An earful of State law is at the front door. I’m going out the back. Get in their way all you can.” Tremaine dropped the phone, grabbed up the suitcase and let himself out into the hall. The back stairs were dark. He stumbled, cursed, made it to the service entry. Outside, the alley was deserted.

He went to the corner, crossed the street, thrust the suitcase into the back seat of his car and slid into the driver’s seat. He started up and eased away from the curb. He glanced in the mirror. There was no alarm.

It was a four-block drive to Miss Carroll’s house. The housekeeper let Tremaine in.

“Oh, yes, Miss Carroll is still up,” she said. “She never retires until nine. I’ll tell her you’re here, Mr. Tremaine.”

\* \* \* \*

Tremaine paced the room. On his third circuit Miss Carroll came in.

“I wouldn’t have bothered you if it wasn’t important,” Tremaine said. “I can’t explain it all now. You said once you had confidence in me. Will you come with me now? It concerns Bram...and maybe a lot more than just Bram.”

Miss Carroll looked at him steadily. “I’ll get my wrap.”

On the highway Tremaine said, “Miss Carroll, we’re headed for Bram’s house. I take it you’ve heard of what happened out there?”

“No, James. I haven’t stirred out of the house. What is it?”

“A gang of teen-age toughs went out last night. They had guns. One of them took a shot at Bram. And Bram’s disappeared. But I don’t think he’s dead.”

Miss Carroll gasped. “Why? Why did they do it?”

“I don’t think they know themselves.”

“You say...you believe he still lives...”

“He must be alive. It dawned on me a little while ago...a little late, I’ll admit. The locket he gave you. Did you ever try it?”

“Try it? Why...no. I don’t believe in magic, James.”

“Not magic. Electronics. Years ago Bram talked to me about radio. He wanted to teach me. Now I’m here looking for a transmitter. That transmitter was busy last night. I think Bram was operating it.”

There was a long silence.



“James,” Miss Carroll said at last, “I don’t understand.”

“Neither do I, Miss Carroll. I’m still working on finding the pieces. But let me ask you: that night that Bram brought you out to his place. You say he ran to the kitchen and opened a trapdoor in the floor—”

“Did I say floor? That was an error: the panel was in the wall.”

“I guess I jumped to the conclusion. Which wall?”

“He crossed the room. There was a table, with a candlestick. He went around it and pressed his hand against the wall, beside the wood-box. The panel slid aside. It was very dark within. He ducked his head, because the opening was not large, and stepped inside....”

“That would be the east wall...to the left of the back door?”

“Yes.”

“Now, Miss Carroll, can you remember exactly what Bram said to you that night? Something about fighting something, wasn’t it?”

“I’ve tried for sixty years to put it out of my mind, James. But I remember every word, I think.” She was silent for a moment.

“I was beside him on the buggy seat. It was a warm evening, late in spring. I had told him that I loved him, and...he had responded. He said that he would have spoken long before, but that he had not dared. Now there was that which I must know.

“His life was not his own, he said. He was not...native to this world. He was an agent of a mighty power, and he had trailed a band of criminals....” She broke off. “I could not truly understand that part, James. I fear it was too incoherent. He raved of evil beings who lurked in the shadows of a cave. It was his duty to wage each night an unceasing battle with occult forces.”

“What kind of battle? Were these ghosts, or demons, or what?”

“I don’t know. Evil powers which would be unloosed on the world, unless he met them at the portal as the darkness fell and opposed them.”

“Why didn’t he get help?”

“Only he could stand against them. I knew little of abnormal psychology, but I understood the classic evidence of paranoia. I shrank from him. He sat, leaning forward, his eyes intent. I wept and begged him to take me back. He turned his face to me, and I saw the pain and anguish in his eyes. I loved him...and feared him. And he would not turn back. Night was falling, and the enemy awaited him.”

“Then, when you got to the house...?”

“He had whipped up the horses, and I remember how I clung to the top braces, weeping. Then we were at the house. Without a word he jumped down and ran to the door. I followed. He lit a lamp and turned to me. From somewhere there was a wailing call, like an injured animal. He shouted something—an unintelligible cry—and ran toward the back of the house. I took up the lamp and followed. In the

kitchen he went to the wall, pressed against it. The panel opened. He looked at me. His face was white.

“In the name of the High God. Linda Carroll, I entreat you....’

“I screamed. And he hardened his face, and went down...and I screamed and screamed again....” Miss Carroll closed her eyes, drew a shuddering breath.

“I’m sorry to have put you through this, Miss Carroll,” Tremaine said. “But I had to know.”

Faintly in the distance a siren sounded. In the mirror, headlights twinkled half a mile behind. Tremaine stepped on the gas. The powerful car leaped ahead.

“Are you expecting trouble on the road, James?”

“The State police are unhappy with me, Miss Carroll. And I imagine they’re not too pleased with Jess. Now they’re out for blood. But I think I can outrun them.”

“James.” Miss Carroll said, sitting up and looking behind. “If those are police officers, shouldn’t you stop?”

“I can’t, Miss Carroll. I don’t have time for them now. If my idea means anything, we’ve got to get there fast....”

\* \* \* \*

Bram’s house loomed gaunt and dark as the car whirled through the gate, ground to a stop before the porch. Tremaine jumped out, went around the car and helped Miss Carroll out. He was surprised at the firmness of her step. For a moment, in the fading light of dusk, he glimpsed her profile. *How beautiful she must have been....*

He reached into the glove compartment for a flashlight.

“We haven’t got a second to waste,” he said. “That other car’s not more than a minute behind us.” He reached into the back of the car, hauled out the heavy suitcase. “I hope you remember how Bram worked that panel.”

On the porch Tremaine’s flashlight illuminated the broken hasp. Inside, he led the way along a dark hall, pushed into the kitchen.

“It was there,” Miss Carroll said, pointing. Outside, an engine sounded on the highway, slowing, turning in. Headlights pushed a square of cold light across the kitchen wall. Tremaine jumped to the spot Miss Carroll had indicated, put the suitcase down, felt over the wall.

“Give me the light, James,” Miss Carroll said calmly. “Press there.” She put the spot on the wall. Tremaine leaned against it. Nothing happened. Outside, there was the thump of car doors; a muffled voice barked orders.

“Are you sure...?”

“Yes. Try again, James.”

Tremaine threw himself against the wall, slapped at it, searching for a hidden latch.

"A bit higher; Bram was a tall man. The panel opened below...."

Tremaine reached higher, pounded, pushed up, sideways—

With a click a three by four foot section of wall rolled silently aside. Tremaine saw greased metal slides and, beyond, steps leading down.

"They are on the porch now, James," said Miss Carroll.

"The light!" Tremaine reached for it, threw a leg over the sill. He reached back, pulled the suitcase after him. "Tell them I kidnapped you, Miss Carroll. And thanks."

Miss Carroll held out her hand. "Help me, James. I hung back once before. I'll not repeat my folly."

Tremaine hesitated for an instant, then reached out, handed Miss Carroll in. Footsteps sounded in the hall. The flashlight showed Tremaine a black pushbutton bolted to a two by four stud. He pressed it. The panel slid back in place.

Tremaine flashed the light on the stairs.

"Okay, Miss Carroll," he said softly. "Let's go down."

\* \* \* \*

There were fifteen steps, and at the bottom, a corridor, with curved walls of black glass, and a floor of rough boards. It went straight for twenty feet and ended at an old-fashioned five-panel wooden door. Tremaine tried the brass knob. The door opened on a room shaped from a natural cave, with waterworn walls of yellow stone, a low uneven ceiling, and a packed-earth floor. On a squat tripod in the center of the chamber rested an apparatus of black metal and glass, vaguely gunlike, aimed at the blank wall. Beside it, in an ancient wooden rocker, a man lay slumped, his shirt blood-caked, a black puddle on the floor beneath him.

"Bram!" Miss Carroll gasped. She went to him, took his hand, staring into his face.

"Is he dead?" Tremaine said tightly.

"His hands are cold...but there is a pulse."

A kerosene lantern stood by the door. Tremaine lit it, brought it to the chair. He took out a pocket knife, cut the coat and shirt back from Bram's wound. A shotgun blast had struck him in the side; there was a lacerated area as big as Tremaine's hand.

"It's stopped bleeding," he said. "It was just a graze at close range, I'd say." He explored further. "It got his arm too, but not as deep. And I think there are a couple of ribs broken. If he hasn't lost too much blood...." Tremaine pulled off his coat, spread it on the floor.

"Let's lay him out here and try to bring him around."

Lying on his back on the floor, Bram looked bigger than his six-foot-four, younger than his near-century, Tremaine thought. Miss Carroll knelt at the old man's side, chafing his hands, murmuring to him.

Abruptly a thin cry cut the air.

Tremaine whirled, startled. Miss Carroll stared, eyes wide. A low rumble sounded, swelled louder, broke into a screech, cut off.

"Those are the sounds I heard that night," Miss Carroll breathed. "I thought afterwards I had imagined them, but I remember....James, what does it mean?"

"Maybe it means Bram wasn't as crazy as you thought," Tremaine said.

Miss Carroll gasped sharply. "James! Look at the wall—"

Tremaine turned. Vague shadows moved across the stone, flickering, wavering.

"What the devil...!"

Bram moaned, stirred. Tremaine went to him. "Bram!" he said. "Wake up!"

Bram's eyes opened. For a moment he looked dazedly at Tremaine, then at Miss Carroll. Awkwardly he pushed himself to a sitting position.

"Bram...you must lie down," Miss Carroll said.

"Linda Carroll," Bram said. His voice was deep, husky.

"Bram, you're hurt..."

A mewling wail started up. Bram went rigid "What hour is this?" he grated.

"The sun has just gone down; it's after seven—"

Bram tried to get to his feet. "Help me up," he ordered. "Curse the weakness...."

Tremaine got a hand under the old man's arm. "Careful, Bram," he said. "Don't start your wound bleeding again."

"To the Repellor," Bram muttered. Tremaine guided him to the rocking chair, eased him down. Bram seized the two black pistol-grips, squeezed them.

"You, young man," Bram said. "Take the circlet there; place it about my neck."

\* \* \* \*

The flat-metal ring hung from a wire loop. Tremaine fitted it over Bram's head. It settled snugly over his shoulders, a flange at the back against his neck.

"Bram," Tremaine said. "What's this all about?"

"Watch the wall there. My sight grows dim. Tell me what you see."

"It looks like shadows: but what's casting them?"

“Can you discern details?”

“No. It’s like somebody waggling their fingers in front of a slide projector.”

“The radiation from the star is yet too harsh,” Bram muttered. “But now the node draws close. May the High Gods guide my hand!”

A howl rang out, a raw blast of sound. Bram tensed. “What do you see?” he demanded.

“The outlines are sharper. There seem to be other shapes behind the moving ones. It’s like looking through a steamy window....” Beyond the misty surface Tremaine seemed to see a high narrow chamber, bathed in white light. In the foreground creatures like shadowy caricatures of men paced to and fro. “They’re like something stamped out of alligator hide,” Tremaine whispered. “When they turn and I see them edge-on, they’re thin....”

“An effect of dimensional attenuation. They strive now to match matrices with this plane. If they succeed, this earth you know will lie at their feet.”

“What are they? Where are they? That’s solid rock—”

“What you see is the Niss Command Center. It lies in another world than this, but here is the multihedron of intersection. They bring their harmonic generators to bear here in the hope of establishing an aperture of focus.”

“I don’t understand half of what you’re saying, Bram. And the rest I don’t believe. But with this staring me in the face, I’ll have to act as though I did.”

Suddenly the wall cleared. Like a surface of moulded glass the stone threw back ghostly highlights. Beyond it, the Niss technicians, seen now in sharp detail, worked busily, silently, their faces like masks of ridged red-brown leather. Directly opposite Bram’s Repellor, an apparatus like an immense camera with a foot-wide silvered lens stood aimed, a black-clad Niss perched in a saddle atop it. The white light flooded the cave, threw black shadows across the floor. Bram hunched over the Repellor, face tensed in strain. A glow built in the air around the Niss machine. The alien technicians stood now, staring with tiny bright-red eyes. Long seconds passed. The black-clad Niss gestured suddenly. Another turned to a red-marked knife-switch, pulled. As suddenly as it had cleared, the wall went milky, then dulled to opacity. Bram slumped back, eyes shut, breathing hoarsely.

“Near were they then,” he muttered, “I grow weak....”

“Let me take over,” Tremaine said. “Tell me how.”

“How can I tell you? You will not understand.”

“Maybe I’ll understand enough to get us through the night.”

Bram seemed to gather himself. “Very well. This must you know....

“I am an agent in the service of the Great World. For centuries we

have waged war against the Niss, evil beings who loot the continua. They established an Aperture here, on your Earth. We detected it, and found that a Portal could be set up here briefly. I was dispatched with a crew to counter their move—”

“You’re talking gibberish,” Tremaine said. “I’ll pass the Great World and the continua...but what’s an Aperture?”

“A point of material contact between the Niss world and this plane of space-time. Through it they can pump this rich planet dry of oxygen, killing it—then emerge to feed on the corpse.”

“What’s a Portal?”

“The Great World lies in a different harmonic series than do Earth and the Niss World. Only at vast intervals can we set up a Portal of temporary identity as the cycles mesh. We monitor the Niss emanations, and forestall them when we can, now in this plane, now in that.”

“I see: denial to the enemy.”

“But we were late. Already the multihedron was far advanced. A blinding squall lashed outside the river cave where the Niss had focused the Aperture, and the thunder rolled as the ionization effect was propagated in the atmosphere. I threw my force against the Niss Aperture, but could not destroy it...but neither could they force their entry.”

“And this was sixty years ago? And they’re still at it?”

“You must throw off the illusion of time! To the Niss only a few days have passed. But here—where I spend only minutes from each night in the engagement, as the patterns coincide—it has been long years.”

“Why don’t you bring in help? Why do you have to work alone?”

“The power required to hold the Portal in focus against the stresses of space-time is tremendous. Even then the cycle is brief. It gave us first a fleeting contact of a few seconds; it was through that that we detected the Niss activity here. The next contact was four days later, and lasted twenty-four minutes—long enough to set up the Repellor. I fought them then...and saw that victory was in doubt. Still, it was a fair world; I could not let it go without a struggle. A third identity was possible twenty days later; I elected to remain here until then, attempt to repel the Niss, then return home at the next contact. The Portal closed, and my crew and I settled down to the engagement.

“The next night showed us in full the hopelessness of the contest. By day, we emerged from where the Niss had focussed the Aperture, and explored this land, and came to love its small warm sun, its strange blue sky, its mantle of green...and the small humble grass-blades. To us of an ancient world it seemed a paradise of young life. And then I ventured into the town...and there I saw such a maiden as

the Cosmos has forgotten, such was her beauty....

"The twenty days passed. The Niss held their foothold—yet I had kept them back.

"The Portal reopened. I ordered my crew back. It closed. Since then, have I been alone...."

"Bram," Miss Carroll said. "Bram...you stayed when you could have escaped—and I—"

"I would that I could give you back those lost years, Linda Carroll," Bram said. "I would that we could have been together under a brighter sun than this."

"You gave up your world, to give this one a little time," Tremaine said. "And we rewarded you with a shotgun blast."

"Bram...when will the Portal open again?"

"Not in my life, Linda Carroll. Not for ten thousand years."

"Why didn't you recruit help?" Tremaine said. "You could have trained someone...."

"I tried, at first. But what can one do with frightened rustics? They spoke of witchcraft, and fled."

"But you can't hold out forever. Tell me how this thing works. It's time somebody gave you a break!"

## V

Bram talked for half an hour, while Tremaine listened. "If I should fail," he concluded, "take my place at the Repellor. Place the circlet on your neck. When the wall clears, grip the handles and pit your mind against the Niss. Will that they do not come through. When the thunder rolls, you will know that you have failed."

"All right. I'll be ready. But let me get one thing straight: this Repellor of yours responds to thoughts, is that right? It amplifies them —"

"It serves to focus the power of the mind. But now let us make haste. Soon, I fear, will they renew the attack."

"It will be twenty minutes or so, I think," said Tremaine. "Stay where you are and get some rest."

Bram looked at him, his blue eyes grim under white brows. "What do you know of this matter, young man?"

"I think I've doped out the pattern; I've been monitoring these transmissions for weeks. My ideas seemed to prove out okay the last few nights."

"No one but I in all this world knew of the Niss attack. How could you have analyzed that which you knew not of?"

"Maybe you don't know it, Bram, but this Repellor of yours has been playing hell with our communications. Recently we developed what we thought was a Top Secret project—and you're blasting us off

the air.”

“This is only a small portable unit, poorly screened,” Bram said. “The resonance effects are unpredictable. When one seeks to channel the power of thought—”

“Wait a minute!” Tremaine burst out.

“What is it?” Miss Carroll said, alarmed.

“Hyperwave,” Tremaine said. “Instantaneous transmission. And thought. No wonder people had headaches—and nightmares! We’ve been broadcasting on the same band as the human mind!”

“This ‘hyperwave’,” Bram said. “You say it is instantaneous?”

“That’s supposed to be classified information.”

“Such a device is new in the cosmos,” Bram said. “Only a protoplasmic brain is known to produce a null-lag excitation state.”

Tremaine frowned. “Bram, this Repellor focuses what I’ll call thought waves for want of a better term. It uses an interference effect to damp out the Niss harmonic generator. What if we poured more power to the Repellor?”

“No. The power of the mind cannot be amplified—”

“I don’t mean amplification; I mean an additional source. I have a hyperwave receiver here. With a little rewiring, it’ll act as a transmitter. Can we tie it in?”

Bram shook his head. “Would that I were a technician,” he said. “I know only what is required to operate the device.”

“Let me take a look,” Tremaine said. “Maybe I can figure it out.”

“Take care. Without it, we fall before the Niss.”

“I’ll be careful.” Tremaine went to the machine, examined it, tracing leads, identifying components.

“This seems clear enough,” he said. “These would be powerful magnets here; they give a sort of pinch effect. And these are refracting-field coils. Simple, and brilliant. With this idea, we could beam hyperwave—”

“First let us deal with the Niss!”

“Sure.” Tremaine looked at Bram. “I think I can link my apparatus to this,” he said. “Okay if I try?”

“How long?”

“It shouldn’t take more than fifteen minutes.”

“That leaves little time.”

“The cycle is tightening,” Tremaine said. “I figure the next transmissions...or attacks...will come at intervals of under five minutes for several hours now; this may be the last chance.”

“Then try,” said Bram.

Tremaine nodded, went to the suitcase, took out tools and a heavy black box, set to work. Linda Carroll sat by Bram’s side, speaking softly to him. The minutes passed.



“Okay,” Tremaine said. “This unit is ready.” He went to the Repellor, hesitated a moment, then turned two nuts and removed a cover.

“We’re off the air,” he said. “I hope my formula holds.”

\* \* \* \*

Bram and Miss Carroll watched silently as Tremaine worked. He strung wires, taped junctions, then flipped a switch on the hyperwave set and tuned it, his eyes on the dials of a smaller unit.

“Nineteen minutes have passed since the last attack,” Bram said. “Make haste.”

“I’m almost done,” Tremaine said.

A sharp cry came from the wall. Tremaine jumped. “What the hell makes those sounds?”

“They are nothing—mere static. But they warn that the harmonic generators are warming.” Bram struggled to his feet. “Now comes the assault.”

“The shadows!” Miss Carroll cried.

Bram sank into the chair, leaned back, his face pale as wax in the faint glow from the wall. The glow grew brighter; the shadows swam into focus.

“Hurry, James,” Miss Carroll said. “It comes quickly.”

Bram watched through half-closed eyes. “I must man the Repellor. I...” He fell back in the chair, his head lolling.

“Bram!” Miss Carroll cried. Tremaine snapped the cover in place, whirled to the chair, dragged it and its occupant away from the machine, then turned, seized the grips. On the wall the Niss moved in silence, readying the attack. The black-clad figure was visible, climbing to his place. The wall cleared. Tremaine stared across at the narrow room, the gray-clad Niss. They stood now, eyes on him. One pointed. Others erected leathery crests.

*Stay out, you ugly devils,* Tremaine thought. *Go back, retreat, give up.*

...

Now the blue glow built in a flickering arc across the Niss machine. The technicians stood, staring across the narrow gap, tiny red eyes glittering in the narrow alien faces. Tremaine squinted against the brilliant white light from the high-vaulted Niss Command Center. The last suggestion of the sloping surface of the limestone wall was gone. Tremaine felt a draft stir; dust whirled up, clouded the air. There was an odor of iodine.

*Back,* Tremaine thought. *Stay back...*

There was a restless stir among the waiting rank of Niss. Tremaine heard the dry shuffle of horny feet against the floor, the whine of the harmonic generator. His eyes burned. As a hot gust swept around him

he choked and coughed.

*NO!* he thought, hurling negation like a weightless bomb. *FAIL! RETREAT!*

\* \* \* \*

Now the Niss moved, readying a wheeled machine, rolling it into place. Tremaine coughed rackingly, fought to draw a breath, blinking back blindness. A deep thrumming started up; grit particles stung his cheek, the backs of his hands. The Niss worked rapidly, their throat gills visibly dilated now in the unaccustomed flood of oxygen....

*Our oxygen,* Tremaine thought. *The looting has started already, and I've failed, and the people of Earth will choke and die....*

From what seemed an immense distance, a roll of thunder trembled at the brink of audibility, swelling.

The black-clad Niss on the alien machine half rose, erecting a black-scaled crest, exulting. Then, shockingly, his eyes fixed on Tremaine's, his trap-like mouth gaped, exposing a tongue like a scarlet snake, a cavernous pink throat set with a row of needle-like snow-white teeth. The tongue flicked out, a gesture of utter contempt.

And suddenly Tremaine was cold with deadly rage. *We have a treatment for snakes in this world,* he thought with savage intensity. *We crush 'em under our heels....* He pictured a writhing rattler, broken-backed, a club descending; a darting red coral snake, its venom ready, slashed in the blades of a power mower; a cottonmouth, smashed into red ruin by a shotgun blast....

*BACK, SNAKE,* he thought. *DIE! DIE!*

The thunder faded.

And atop the Niss Generator, the black-clad Niss snapped his mouth shut, crouched.

"DIE!" Tremaine shouted. "Die!"

The Niss seemed to shrink in on himself, shivering. His crest went flaccid, twitched twice. The red eyes winked out and the Niss toppled from the machine. Tremaine coughed, gripped the handles, turned his eyes to a gray-uniformed Niss who scrambled up to replace the operator.

*I SAID DIE, SNAKE!*

The Niss faltered, tumbled back among his fellows, who darted about now like ants in a broached anthill. One turned red eyes on Tremaine, then scrambled for the red cut-out switch.

*NO, YOU DON'T,* Tremaine thought. *IT'S NOT THAT EASY, SNAKE. DIE!*

The Niss collapsed. Tremaine drew a rasping breath, blinked back tears of pain, took in a group of Niss in a glance.

*Die!*

They fell. The others turned to flee then, but like a scythe Tremaine's mind cut them down, left them in windrows. Hate walked naked among the Niss and left none living.

*Now the machines.* Tremaine thought. He fixed his eyes on the harmonic generator. It melted into slag. Behind it, the high panels set with jewel-like lights blackened, crumpled into wreckage. Suddenly the air was clean again. Tremaine breathed deep. Before him the surface of the rock swam into view.

**NO!** Tremaine thought thunderously. **HOLD THAT APERTURE OPEN!**

The rock-face shimmered, faded. Tremaine looked into the white-lit room, at the blackened walls, the huddled dead. *No pity,* he thought. *You would have sunk those white teeth into soft human throats, sleeping in the dark...as you've done on a hundred worlds. You're a cancer in the cosmos. And I have the cure.*

**WALLS,** he thought, **COLLAPSE!**

The roof before him sagged, fell in. Debris rained down from above, the walls tottered, went down. A cloud of roiled dust swirled, cleared to show a sky blazing with stars.

*Dust, stay clear,* Tremaine thought. *I want good air to breathe for the work ahead.* He looked out across a landscape of rock, ghostly white in the starlight.

**LET THE ROCKS MELT AND FLOW LIKE WATER!**

An upreared slab glowed, slumped, ran off in yellow rivulets that were lost in the radiance of the crust as it bubbled, belching released gasses. A wave of heat struck Tremaine. *Let it be cool here,* he thought. *Now, Niss world...*

"No!" Bram's voice shouted. "Stop, stop!"

Tremaine hesitated. He stared at the vista of volcanic fury before him.

*I could destroy it all,* he thought. *And the stars in the Niss sky....*

"Great is the power of your hate, man of Earth," Bram cried. "But curb it now, before you destroy us all!"

"Why?" Tremaine shouted. "I can wipe out the Niss and their whole diseased universe with them, with a thought!"

"Master yourself," Bram said hoarsely. "Your rage destroys you! One of the suns you see in the Niss sky is your Sol!"

"Sol?" Tremaine said. "Then it's the Sol of a thousand years ago. Light takes time to cross a galaxy. And the earth is still here...so it wasn't destroyed!"

"Wise are you," Bram said. "Your race is a wonder in the Cosmos, and deadly is your hate. But you know nothing of the forces you unloose now. Past time is as mutable as the steel and rock you melted

but now.”

“Listen to him, James,” Miss Carroll pleaded. “Please listen.”

Tremaine twisted to look at her, still holding the twin grips. She looked back steadily, her head held high. Beside her, Bram’s eyes were sunken deep in his lined face.

“Jess said you looked like a princess once, Miss Carroll,” Tremaine said, “when you drove past with your red hair piled up high. And Bram: you were young, and you loved her. The Niss took your youth from you. You’ve spent your life here, fighting them, alone. And Linda Carroll waited through the years, because she loved you...and feared you. The Niss did that. And you want me to spare them?”

“You have mastered them,” said Bram. “And you are drunk with the power in you. But the power of love is greater than the power of hate. Our love sustained us; your hate can only destroy.”

Tremaine locked eyes with the old man. He drew a deep breath at last, let it out shudderingly. “All right,” he said “I guess the God complex got me.” He looked back once more at the devastated landscape. “The Niss will remember this encounter, I think. They won’t try Earth again.”

“You’ve fought valiantly, James, and won,” Miss Carroll said. “Now let the power go.”

Tremaine turned again to look at her. “You deserve better than this, Miss Carroll,” he said. “Bram, you said time is mutable. Suppose —”

“Let well enough alone,” Bram said. “Let it go!”

“Once, long ago, you tried to explain this to Linda Carroll. But there was too much against it; she couldn’t understand. She was afraid. And you’ve suffered for sixty years. Suppose those years had never been. Suppose I had come that night...instead of now—”

“It could never be!”

“It can if I will it!” Tremaine gripped the handles tighter. *Let this be THAT night*, he thought fiercely. *The night in 1901, when Bram’s last contact failed. Let it be that night, five minutes before the portal closed. Only this machine and I remain as we are now; outside there are gas lights in the farm houses along the dirt road to Elsby, and in the town houses stand in the stables along the cinder alleys behind the houses; and President McKinley is having dinner in the White House...*

\* \* \* \*

There was a sound behind Tremaine. He whirled. The ravaged scene was gone. A great disc mirror stood across the cave, intersecting the limestone wall. A man stepped through it, froze at the sight of Tremaine. He was tall, with curly blond hair, fine-chiseled features, broad shoulders.

“Fdazh ha?” he said. Then his eyes slid past Tremaine, opened still wider in astonishment. Tremaine followed the stranger’s glance. A young woman, dressed in a negligee of pale silk, stood in the door, a hair-brush in her hand, her red hair flowing free to her waist. She stood rigid in shock.

Then....

“Mr. Bram...!” she gasped. “What—”

Tremaine found his voice. “Miss Carroll, don’t be afraid,” he said. “I’m your friend, you must believe me.”

Linda Carroll turned wide eyes to him. “Who are you?” she breathed. “I was in my bedroom—”

“I can’t explain. A miracle has been worked here tonight...on your behalf.” Tremaine turned to Bram. “Look—” he started.

“What man are you?” Bram cut in in heavily accented English. “How do you come to this place?”

“Listen to me, Bram!” Tremaine snapped. “Time is mutable. You stayed here, to protect Linda Carroll—and Linda Carroll’s world. You’ve just made that decision, right?” Tremaine went on, not waiting for a reply. “You were stuck here...for sixty years. Earth technology developed fast. One day a man stumbled in here, tracing down the signal from your Repellor; that was me. You showed me how to use the device...and with it I wiped out the Niss. And then I set the clock back for you and Linda Carroll. The Portal closes in two minutes. Don’t waste time....”

“Mutable time?” Bram said. He went past Tremaine to Linda. “Fair lady of Earth,” he said. “Do not fear....”

“Sir, I hardly know you,” Miss Carroll said. “How did I come here, hardly clothed—”

“Take her, Bram!” Tremaine shouted. “Take her and get back through that Portal—fast.” He looked at Linda Carroll. “Don’t be afraid,” he said. “You know you love him; go with him now, or regret it all your days.”

“Will you come?” asked Bram. He held out his hand to her. Linda hesitated, then put her hand in his. Bram went with her to the mirror surface, handed her through. He looked back at Tremaine.

“I do not understand, man of Earth,” he said “But I thank you.” Then he was gone.

\* \* \* \*

Alone in the dim-lit grotto Tremaine let his hands fall from the grips, staggered to the rocker and sank down. He felt weak, drained of strength. His hands ached from the strain of the ordeal. How long had it lasted? Five minutes? An hour? Or had it happened at all...?

But Bram and Linda Carroll were gone. He hadn’t imagined that.

And the Niss were defeated.

But there was still his own world to contend with. The police would be waiting, combing through the house. They would want to know what he had done with Miss Carroll. Maybe there would be a murder charge. There'd be no support from Fred and the Bureau. As for Jess, he was probably in a cell now, looking a stiff sentence in the face for obstructing justice....

Tremaine got to his feet, cast a last glimpse at the empty room, the outlandish shape of the Repellor, the mirrored portal. It was a temptation to step through it. But this was his world, with all its faults. Perhaps later, when his strength returned, he could try the machine again....

The thought appalled him. *The ashes of hate are worse than the ashes of love*, he thought. He went to the stairs, climbed them, pressed the button. Nothing happened. He pushed the panel aside by hand and stepped into the kitchen. He circled the heavy table with the candlestick, went along the hall and out onto the porch. It was almost the dawn of a fresh spring day. There was no sign of the police. He looked at the grassy lawn, the row of new-set saplings.

*Strange*, he thought. *I don't remember any saplings. I thought I drove in under a row of trees....* He squinted into the misty early morning gloom. His car was gone. That wasn't too surprising; the cops had impounded it, no doubt. He stepped down, glanced at the ground ahead. It was smooth, with a faint footpath cut through the grass. There was no mud, no sign of tire tracks—

The horizon seemed to spin suddenly. *My God!!* Tremaine thought *I've left myself in the year 1901...!*

He whirled, leaped up on the porch, slammed through the door and along the hall, scrambled through the still-open panel, bounded down the stairs and into the cave—

The Repellor was gone. Tremaine leaped forward with a cry—and under his eyes, the great mirror twinkled, winked out. The black box of the hyperwave receiver lay alone on the floor, beside the empty rocker. The light of the kerosene lamp reflected from the featureless wall.

Tremaine turned, stumbled up the steps, out into the air. The sun showed a crimson edge just peeping above distant hills.

1901, Tremaine thought. *The century has just turned. Somewhere a young fellow named Ford is getting ready to put the nation on wheels, and two boys named Wright are about to give it wings. No one ever heard of a World War, or the roaring Twenties, or Prohibition, or FDR, or the Dust Bowl, or Pearl Harbor. And Hiroshima and Nagasaki are just two cities in distant floral Japan....*

He walked down the path, stood by the rutted dirt road. Placid

cows nuzzled damp grass in the meadow beyond it. In the distance a train hooted.

*There are railroads, Tremaine thought. But no jet planes, no radio, no movies, no automatic dish-washers. But then there's no TV, either. That makes up for a lot. And there are no police waiting to grill me, and no murder charge, and no neurotic nest of bureaucrats waiting to welcome me back....*

He drew a deep breath. The air was sweet. *I'm here*, he thought. *I feel the breeze on my face and the firm sod underfoot. It's real, and it's all there is now, so I might as well take it calmly. After all, a man with my education ought to be able to do well in this day and age!*

Whistling, Tremaine started the ten-mile walk into town.

# BRIDGEHEAD, by Frank Belknap Long

Originally published in *Astounding Science Fiction*, August 1944.

The blond Eurasian giant swung in between the big doors, and crossed the room in three long strides. Thick folds of scorched flesh lidded his pupils and his eyes were red-rimmed from lack of sleep, giving him the aspect of a lean and angry bulldog straining at the leash.

“Sit down, Ivor,” a steely voice said. “Over there, where your face won’t be in shadows.”

Straddling a chair, the giant gripped the seat with both hands, and eased his enormous bulk down upon it. He sat facing the Interrogator, grimacing with pain, fumbling for words that would ease the agony and the shame of his failure.

Invisible lighting flooded the big, blank-walled room, and glimmered on the circular top of the examining unit, which stood against one wall, and encircled an Interrogator whose face was a glacial mask *behind* the glimmer.

“Well, Ivor?” the Interrogator prodded.

“My instructions were to familiarize myself with the First Glass Age Sector, particularly the ‘nerve-artery’ metropolises on the northeastern seaboard and the population overflow areas surrounding them,” the giant said quickly, as though repeating a formula learned by rote.

The Interrogator frowned. “Your specific instructions were much more concrete, weren’t they?”

The giant nodded uneasily. Surprisingly he did not feel afraid, though he knew he ought to feel terrified.

“My specific instructions were to blast out a strategic temporal bridgehead in one of those areas. What I actually did was pin-chart the entire seaboard to eliminate the bulge areas.”

“Well, suppose you tell me exactly what happened in your own words. I should *prefer* not to interrupt you.”

“The largest Glass Age metropolis is New York in New York. But there’s a bulge there—a bad one. I decided to blast out the bridgehead in the overflow area surrounding a smaller, coastal bay metropolis a little to the north of New York. Boston in Masschutt...Massachusetts.”

“Well, well?”

“I blasted out a perfect stasis, clear and sharp from our side, but—”

“But...pah. It is a synonym for failure.”

The big Eurasian paled, then decided to ignore the interruption. “The time seepage absorber must have dilated a little too rapidly. I



was standing about forty feet from the edge of the cliff when I blasted. The concussion lifted me up, and hurled me violently forward into the stasis.”

The giant paused, as though he were seeking to convince the Interrogator of his sincerity as much by his manner as his words. The pause was soothing to his bruised ego. It enabled him to dramatize himself as a man who could time his feats of endurance to correspond with the expectations aroused by his words. It also enabled him to relive the entire incident with little more credit to himself.

The Interrogator’s brittle fingers made a drumming sound on the flat top of the examining unit.

“Go on.”

“I allowed for erosion, the blotting out of a half million years of geologic weathering. But I forgot that a slight seismic disturbance could more than offset a complete reversal of the weathering process.”

The giant shuddered. “There can be quite a lot of seismic disturbances in a half million years. Instead of advancing, the entire face of the cliff had moved back. There was a new wall, but it was thirty feet behind me. I...I dropped forty feet and landed on an outcropping about fifty feet in width, and possibly seventy feet from the bottom of the ravine. The blaster struck the shelf, rebounded, and went clattering on down.”

“And you returned without recovering it?”

The Interrogator’s voice was no longer steely. It now possessed a tensile edge that would have bit through steel like a knife through putty.

The giant gnawed at his underlip, and met the Interrogator’s accusing stare with mingled pride and humiliation. The pride of a wounded tiger that has fought many formidable battles before receiving scars of which it is ashamed; the humiliation which a grievous error of judgment leaves in the mind when stark urgency makes the retracing of a wrong trail a thing not to be contemplated.

“I weighed the risks, and decided against it,” he said. “The cliff wall was almost vertical. I might have gone down. I could not have climbed back. The stasis oval was directly above me, thirty feet from the edge of the cliff. I was badly burned—in need of surgical attention.”

“That worried you, did it?”

The giant’s color rose. “Suppose I’d gone down for the blaster, been captured, and sickened and died a half million years in the past. Where would THE PLAN be then?”

“Go right ahead. Tell me how you safeguarded THE PLAN by not recovering the blaster. Your instructions were to conceal the stasis oval from prying eyes on the other side. You were supposed to go

through, and spray it over with a magneto-optical thin film with the same refractive index as the air around it.”

“I couldn’t—”

“You don’t have to tell me. I happen to know you can’t spray out a stasis when it isn’t grounded. The vibrations would...pah! Only saving grace is the glimmering won’t be visible from the ravine.”

“It won’t be!” the giant echoed the words as though they were pearls beyond price. “You’ve got to stand on a level with a stasis to see it.”

“It will be visible from the cliff top,” the Interrogator hammered, shattering each pearl with merciless precision. “But don’t get the idea I’m worried about just that one oval. If they find that blaster, they’ll know they’ve had a visitor.”

The Eurasian’s lips were white. “How could they know? They did not believe time travel to be possible. Their weapons were all incendiary, not atomic. In a crude way they altered electronic orbits and laid the groundwork for much that we have come to regard as end products. But—”

“Like the relativity of time,” the Interrogator suggested chillingly.

“They were familiar with the concept, of course. They could *imagine* what it would be like to leave their own age, and travel into the past. But they no more thought they could do so than that they could travel to...to Betelgeuse.”

“You think so?”

“I do, yes. The concept of time *blasting*, of time undermined and made cavernous, would be utterly beyond the comprehension of Glass Age primitives. Quite apart from the contrasting primitiveness of mining and quarrying with crude detonating instruments in three dimension, the sheer audacity of THE PLAN would—”

“Pah—a mouthful of rhetoric. Now you’ve spit it out, suppose we strip the binding energies from a few facts. We’ve blasted out temporal bridgeheads at strategic temporal Intervals clear back to the Old Stone Age. The past is honeycombed now, and it’s going to become more so. Suppose they find that blaster, blow out a stasis of their own, and start searching for our riddlings.

“Suppose they find one of our riddlings without searching, like the one you left glimmering in plain view when you allowed for erosion, but not for brain shrinkage. If they find the blaster, they’ll be all eyes and ears. Suppose they close in on one of our Sector scouts right after he’s blown a stasis, and before he can spray it out?”

The Interrogator had shut his eyes, and seemed almost to be speaking to himself. “The success of the entire PLAN will depend on how quickly we can move back and forth through time. If we attempted to conquer each age separately, if we attempted an age-

hopping campaign, the divergence in weapon power alone between the more primitive societies and the atomic power civilizations close to our own age might easily result in a decimation of our forces.

"The struggle in many temporal sectors may go against us at first, but, if we can retreat through the stasis ovals when we're hard-pressed, we'll be in a position to regroup our forces. We'll stage a fluid attack on *all* of the past, a stupendous temporal blitz which will pit age against age until we're victorious.

"Our enemies will have to fight in one age, with a limited array of weapons. We can utilize not only our own weapons, but the weapons of every age, the peculiar military genius of every age in which those weapons originated. Since the location of the sprayed-over stasis ovals *will be known to us alone* we'll command all the arteries into the past, all the temporal bridgeheads."

The Interrogator seemed to have forgotten that one artery had become dangerously insecure through the development of an unforeseen flaw in the mental alloy of the man before him.

But suddenly his eyes unlidded themselves and became cobra-opaque.

"Tell me, how did you get back through a stasis that was hovering in the empty air forty feet above your empty skull?"

"I...I climbed back to the top of the cliff and took a running leap," the big Eurasian stammered.

"I see. A severely burned man could do that, but it would be asking too much to expect him to go down into a shallow ravine and recover something that's sure to be missed. Suppose you try that on, just for the fit."

"My burns—" the giant whispered huskily. "I knew if I lost consciousness before I could—"

The Interrogator cut him off by leaning sharply forward.

"Tell me, Ivor. Just how much would you have told them? We know they were not squeamish. They had means of getting at the truth, gradations of torture—"

"I don't know," the giant said, with startling candor. "We no longer torture a man when we want him to speak the truth. We put a drug in his food, so that he doesn't even suspect that he has been sentenced to death. We—"

The giant's pupils dilated and he leaped up with a startled cry.

"COVERALL said I'd feel better if I drank some...no, *oh no!* Why are you nodding? COVERALL didn't...no, no, wait...you must wait! Don't cut me down—not like that—it's horrible that way, it's horrible, it's horrible—"

The compact little energy weapon in the Interrogator's clasp tore a gaping hole in the giant's chest, spun him about, broke his back, and

almost cut him in two.

For a full minute it continued to revolve, splashing radiance on the walls and ceiling of the big room, releasing its energies with a hornet's nest drone.

Actually it made very little noise, and the giant was dead when he struck the floor. But for a full minute the redness welling up from his chest gave the Interrogator an illusion of continuing vitality on which to vent his rage.

He vented it by keeping the weapon trained on the inert lump of flesh until it no longer resembled anything human.

\* \* \* \*

"Things are all right with us now, Eddie," said Betty-Jane Keenan. "But where will we be tomorrow?"

Eddie Keenan stared straight up the hill through the windsights of his converted jeep roadster, telling himself that now he'd married the girl he'd have to watch his temper. He didn't want to lose any part of his everything, waves and waves of happiness swirling around and around somewhere inside of him. Marriage could break up over a little rock as well as a big one, and it didn't take much to wreck a cottage in the pines on the crest of a post-war argument.

"Eddie, I know I shouldn't say anything about it. You'll think I'm nagging you when I'm only thinking how much happier you'd be if you had a steady income. You know what they say about a man who makes his living by his wits. *Of course* you're clever. Very few people could live as luxuriously as we do in short jumps and spasms. Every seventh week we're in the chips, we're jive-happy. Then we sit on the edge of the cliff patching up a parachute with I. O. U.'s and crisp new pawn tickets."

Eddie gave the wheel a savage twist. "Aw, B-Jane, you're making a mountain out of a rejection slip."

"Am I? The last time you pulled yourself back up by your bootstraps the girl you married almost ran off with a psychiatrist. It just shouldn't happen to such really nice people like ourselves."

Eddie gave the wheel another twist. "How much did I get for my last gag, B-Jane?" he said softly.

"Five hundred dollars—for something with no sense."

"And how long would it take you to save that much if I just sat in a cage thumbing through other people's money? That gag welled up from my subconscious in exactly a tenth of a second. Typing it out took a couple of minutes, but—"

"Yes, I know. But who did you ghost-write it for? A pigeon-chested crooner who'll stick his neck out so far one of these days somebody will mistake him for Thanksgiving's little gift to Lizzie Borden. One of

these days he just won't be around, but we will—with nothing to look forward to but a long life behind a seeing-eye dog together."

"B-Jane, the trouble with you is you're afraid to grease the roller coaster. You want to feel safe every waking hour. There's no safety in writing gags at twenty bucks a comma, but it's nice work if you can get it. *I can get it.*"

"Eddie, you're heading into trouble because people who live by their wits end up at their wits' end. The well dries up, the big, bad, lone wolf of a late-sleeping, timeclock-avoiding genius runs out of ideas. Did you ever know one who didn't?"

"No-oo—Look, B-Jane, that last crack, about my being a wolf. You don't really think I'm a wolf."

"I wouldn't have married you if you weren't. Oh, Eddie, oh, Eddie, oh...look out—"

It might have been a worse accident. All the car did was leave the road, turn completely about, balance itself on two wheels and slither down into a ditch.

Neither Eddie nor Betty-Jane was hurt. But the car was in such a condition that just climbing out, and ascending to the road left them angry, flushed and winded.

"B-Jane," Eddie stormed. "We were gypped! That salesman gypped us! The next time I buy a jeep, I'll go down on my hands and knees, and check on its adhesiveness. If it's been over too many cow pastures —"

Eddie kicked a stone at the edge of the road, and decided it wasn't big enough. He vented his spleen on the inanimate, allowing expletives which gave Betty-Jane the most intense satisfaction to well up from the depths of his mind without worrying about replacements.

"Eddie, when you use words like that you're not the man I married. You're making me fall for somebody I really could like."

"That so? You'd like the guy even better if you could hear what he's thinking."

"Eddie, a big stone under one of the rear wheels would be more practical than the heaviest sort of cussing. I'll help you heave. Just find a stone, and...hey, be sure it's a big one!"

Eddie had turned and was already advancing across the road toward a woody stretch where gloomy looking trees clustered thickly.

"Well, I'll see if I can find a stone!" he called back over his shoulder.

\* \* \* \*

Betty-Jane could hardly believe her eyes when she saw the "stone." It was massive, and it glittered, and he was cradling it in the crook of his arm the way he'd have cradled a gun if it had been a gun—which

of course it wasn't.

It wasn't, that is, at first glance. When he came up over the hump of the road and she got a good look at it her incredulity diminished a little, and she feared she might have to kiss good-by to her sanity.

He'd been gone twenty minutes, a long enough time for something outlandish to happen. But how could he have wrapped himself in an... aura when his gait showed he couldn't have met up with an old brass rail and a row of pink ladies. Certainly the gun wasn't pinkish, and he was backing away from it and making faces. He was holding it.

"B-Jane," he panted. "Look...look at this! Look at it, B-Jane! It's some sort of outlandish weapon. There's a cliff back there, and it was lying—"

She knew he'd come straight to her with the gun because he was like a little boy in some respects. He just couldn't keep shining new discoveries to himself. Most of his discoveries were subjective, but this one certainly wasn't.

It seemed odd to her he should have used a word that had popped up out of her own subconscious in connection with it until it dawned on her he'd been peppered and made dizzy in precisely the same way.

Odd—but understandable. The gun was outlandish, as though it had come right out of one of those imaginative science magazines which Eddie was always reading. Visitors from other planets, fantastic future weapons, and—things.

When she shut her eyes she could still hear Eddie praising the superlative insight of the writers, as though the tentacled thing with a puckered mouth on one of the covers had slithered right out from the compact little magazine in Eddie's pocket.

"B-Jane, a good many of these stories are mature, genuine. Not enough people realize how much sound science and mental elbow grease goes into them. Take that ray gun now. You can bet your sweet life the artist who drew that had to sweat holes in his imagination."

The weapon in Eddie's clasp looked as though somebody had been sweating holes in the Government's post-war priority program. Apparently a lot of valuable new metals had gone into it, along with some very tensile mental haywire. It had a startling you'll-never-guess-where-I-came-from look.

Betty Jane would have preferred not to try, but she knew she'd have to when she saw how pale Eddie was. Along with the shining new discovery look his eyes held unmistakable glints of panic.

"It was lying in a pool of rain water right at the base of the cliff, B-Jane. How do you suppose it got there? It's a high-bracket piece of hardware, all right—complex, massive. I can't imagine anyone deliberately—"

"I can!" she said, snatching it from his clasp as though it were a

razor-edged top he'd won shooting marbles. "Post-war letdown unhinges bright young inventor. In the blue Massachusetts hills he has what he thinks is an inspiration. He'll use the family barn, and that big junk pile the neighbors are always adding to.

"Night and day he keeps plugging away, and suddenly—he has it, he's got it! A weapon that'll separate out the fatty components of milk, that'll churn milk up into butter before it leaves the cow. He gets all steamed up, and rushes out into the woods looking for a purple cow. But suddenly again...you know how crackpots are...he gets the idea the weapon is an unwanted kitten, and tries to drown it, in a pool of rain water. Then he gets scared, or something, and *you* happen along."

Eddie did not even smile. "B-Jane, if a crackpot invented a weapon as complex as that it might not be—a laughing matter."

"Oh, shut up!"

Betty-Jane was trembling in spite of herself. The gun was complex, all right. The barrel flared, and was so dazzling it blinded her. In fact, it hurt her brain when she concentrated on it, so that for an instant she had the illusion that her skull was being crushed by a nutcracker with invisible prongs.

But the heavy stock was the really complex part of the gun—a gleaming conglomeration of notched disks, wheels, knobs, and dangling strips of metal so intricately welded together they seemed to blend with a glimmering conglomeration of valves, tubes, wheels and dangling strips of metal. Welded together into a compact unit which seemed almost to blend with a gleaming—Betty-Jane tore her gaze from the stock, and tried to smile.

"Eddie, I didn't mean to snap at you like that. But I wasn't seriously trying to laugh my way out of anything. I don't know where the gun came from any more than you do. How could I know?"

The panic in Eddie's eyes was growing. He hadn't dared tell her the gun seemed to be pointing in the wrong direction. Not that the barrel was actually twisting back up over the stock. It wasn't as pronounced as that—wasn't in fact anything but a kind of impression he got when he stared at the gun steadily.

It had not been in Betty-Jane's mind to take any chances with so strange, so unfathomable a weapon. But suddenly she had raised it to her shoulder and was sighting it along the road. Suddenly, too, her fingers were moving furtively, almost feverishly over the stock, as though in the depths of her mind were Pandora-like stirrings.

It was on the tip of Eddie's tongue to warn her not to be such a fool, that the gun was not to be trusted. But abruptly, before he could shout a warning, she seemed to sense his agitation. She nodded guiltily, and started to lower the weapon. Her eyes dilated in sudden horror—

The two island universes which had collided inside Eddie's head took their time in going their separate ways in silence. They left a trail of blazing super-novae, and dizzily spinning giant and dwarf stars, hot, cold, red, blue, and yellow—all in the plane of a super-ecliptic superimposed on the lobes of Eddie's bruised brain, and the little pools of white-hot lava which studded his spinal column.

Then—Eddie's torment became medieval and almost droll. There was no transition period. Suddenly the suns were gone, and very conventional little demons with forked red tails were racing around and around inside his skull.

"Oh, nonsense!" someone yelled out lustily, and the demons were gone.

A long row of very beautiful mint juleps next appeared on the rim of Eddie's consciousness. The rest of his mind was a desert, and across its sands a parched manikin that could only have been himself dragged itself with heaving shoulders. The manikin never seemed to make any progress. But the juleps grew more beautiful—more and more beautiful until the manikin burst into convulsive sobs, and the juleps turned into tall, pale women on the rim of Eddie's mind.

A huge book opened slowly, and a bony finger wrote on a blank page: Sorry, Eddie, but we've got to close up. Here's your check, Eddie—here's your cane and your homburg. Hey, Eddie, wake up!!

Eddie sat up. The first thing he noticed was his torn-off shirt, which was twisted around his legs. Then he noticed with mounting consternation that his torso was sooty and his trousers ripped. There was deep grass on both sides of him, long, luxurious jungle grass, and he was sitting on something mound-like that felt uncomfortably like an ant hill.

Unmistakably there was a rustling beneath him, accompanied by little stabs of pain lancing up through the posterior ligaments of his knees which were beginning to dissolve in blobs of light.

The rustling grew vague suddenly, and almost he saw the book again.

"Eddie, Eddie...hey, we're closing up!"

In a jungle, he thought drowsily, you had to expect ants. Tropical jungle—ants. Long grass—very primitive life—must take it easy. White man—quinine—'sportant to relax—

Huh?

Eddie's faculties were suddenly alert—as sharp as the purple-edged blades of lush jungle grass which had grown up about him.

Memory didn't rush back exactly. It descended upon him like a pendulum swinging down toward him through a pea-soup fog. There was startlement at first, and a lightening of the mist, and then it swung very low with a blazing swish.



An explosion. It had begun with an explosion. Light on her face as she turned, the weapon jerking in her hand. He'd screamed hoarsely and tried to duck. The roar had deafened him and then—

Not too clear. His knees had buckled and there had been—a glimmering? He'd been hurled back into a glimmering? He thought he had because he remembered a sensation of floundering in a sea of light that had become suddenly opaque. He remembered nothing else.

He rose swayingly the instant he realized the gray wall inside his head was hindering his explorations. He could see at once that he was alone in the jungle. No, it...it wasn't a jungle. It was a sort of clearing in reverse. Right where he stood the grass was waist-high and thick, but there were blue distances in all directions where the grass grew sparsely, and—

The road was gone. It shocked him that he could miss the road more than his wife until he remembered that the missing road had *included* his wife.

A strange look came in Eddie's face—a look not often seen outside of monastic cells and the battle-scarred waste places of the earth. Almost savagely he told himself that now when there was a...a wrongness like the beat of vulture wings all about him he'd be less than a man if he didn't slough off the glowing chrysalis he'd worn on the other track. He'd have to become inwardly lean again, a hard, tough fighter who could take *anything* in his stride. With no holds barred, with only himself to worry about—

"Eddie, grab hold of me—hold on to me, and don't let me think!"

Betty-Jane was in his arms before Eddie's mind could adjust to the chill urgency of spinning the leanness out into a cloak to cover her shuddering approach.

"Eddie, we're not... I'm not... I could never stand it, Eddie! Dribbling in a straitjacket, being fed through a tube—"

"Tube?" Eddie said, dazedly. Then, as comprehension dawned, "Of course you're not. That's right—just keep digging your thumbs in deep. My tonsils are too large anyway."

"Eddie, it was pure nitric acid torment. Am I hurting you, Eddie. I'm honestly not trying to choke you, or anything. I just had to make sure you're real and I'm not—"

Eddie forced a smile.

"B-Jane, darling, if you were you wouldn't be talking about it. Folks who have it are catatonically depressed. They're not interested in themselves, or their environment. You're interested, I take it?"

"Oh, Eddie, and how!"

"Sure, then, and it's talking it over calmly we should be doing, like the civilized, top-drawer people we are. B-Jane, *where's that gun?*"

She gestured toward an ingrown clump of jungle grass at the edge

of the clearing that had bunched itself up into a dry oasis without consulting the scenery it had managed to displace.

“Right over there, Eddie.”

“All right. We’ll get around to it. Just a couple of questions first. You say I was blown through a glimmering into here. What made the glimmering?”

“The gun, Eddie. It blew a hole right through the...the old stand. A shining oval in the air. But, if you stand a little ways back, you can hardly see it, Eddie. Inside you flounder. I started to walk and ended up on my hands and knees. I thought I’d never get through.”

Eddie frowned, and shut his eyes an instant. His furred brow, and twitching facial muscles gave him an aspect of watching little sparkling triangulations canceling themselves out in the darkness behind his eyelids.

“Nuts!”

“Eddie?”

“Solving anything as insane as this by ear is...hold on, maybe I’ve got something. Maybe I have at that. If...if that gun had merely blown a hole in the air, we’d still be at the old stand. But if it had blown a hole in the warp-and-woof stuff of the physical universe—”

“Eddie!”

“Where would we be then?”

“Outside the universe,” Jane whispered, feeling like a child who has watched her schoolbooks burst into flames, and must say the right thing before the classroom explodes in her face.

“Well, yes, that’s one possibility. But if we were in some unimaginable dimension outside—say in a kind of blister-gall on De Sitter’s skin of the orange turned inside out universe, everything would be illogical, mixed up. It isn’t at all.”

“What’s the other possibility?”

“*Time* is a dimension, B-Jane. Time is a dimension, but—what would pure time be like? We just don’t know because we could no more live in time than we could live in length without thickness. We live in a world of four dimensions, and time is only one of them. But suppose that gun did something to time?

“Suppose it blew a hole in space-time—the space-time continuum of the physicists—and made a fluid bridge of time between two widely separated space-time frames. Inside the rent you’d have pure time, a kind of stasis in the continuum. Outside—”

“Outside?”

“Two widely separated ages.”

Betty-Jane made a little whimpering sound deep in her throat.

“You mean you think we may be—in the future?”

“Or in the past,” Eddie said. “I’m just guessing, understand. I’ve

just knifed down at random and cut myself a slice of something that may turn out to be nuttier than a fruit cake.”

“But, who, Eddie—”

“Who?”

“Who could have invented a weapon like that—”

Eddie was about to reply when he saw in the distance a moving something which made him catch his breath and forestalled a still deeper plunge into the dubious maelstrom of assumptions his thoughts had set in motion.

For a full minute the object remained *very* distant, a scarcely visible red dust mote advancing steadily over the short grass expanse which fringed the long grass, for several miles in a circular direction.

There was no reason why so small an object should have chilled Eddie to the core of his being, and filled him with a terrifying sense of urgency. Yet chill him it did, so that his teeth were chattering when it ceased to be a dust mate, and came *loping* toward them.

Betty-Jane screamed when she saw it, and suddenly it was as large as a lion, and growing larger. It moved almost effortlessly, the muscles rippling along its untiring flanks, and through every aspect of its approach there was as much of stealth as of speed, there was no sacrifice of speed, and it moved with the rapidity of a thunderbolt.

Eddie never knew how he reached the clump of tall withergrass where Betty-Jane had left the gun. Neither did Betty-Jane, despite the sobbing cry of relief which welled up from her throat when she met him there.

Eddie snatched up the gun, then remembered he didn't know how to fire it. Frantically he plucked and tore at the stock, but it wouldn't, *it wouldn't*, IT WOULDN'T—

Betty-Jane snatched it from him just as the long grass shook, and the cyclopean cat burst through upon them.

She fired from the shoulder, at almost point-blank range.

There was a blinding flash of light, an explosion which ripped at her flesh. The explosion was Krakatoan, and for an instant Betty-Jane was sure that an active volcano had erupted in her face.

The glimmering seemed to precede the explosion by the barest instant, but that, she knew, was an illusion, caused by the fact that sound and light do not travel at the same speeds when convulsing. What she did not know was whether she had blown a hole in the physical universe, or just a hole in the cat.

All she could see was the cyclopean beast etched against the glimmer, its rust-red tusks drooling saliva, its unsheathed claws outspread.

For an instant it hovered directly above her, as though frozen in the act of descending. Then the gaping scarlet hole in its chest became

a gushing Niagara, and it went sailing back through the glimmering out of sight.

Before he'd begin his gags Eddie would get up, pace the floor, drink three cups of black coffee, light a cigarette, take six short puffs, crush out the cigarette, examine his haggard face in a shaving mirror, pace the floor, grimace, brush the erasings out of his typewriter, sit down, and—

Then he'd type out the gag, very swiftly with one finger.

It was curious, but Eddie went through the same agony now. He knew the disappearing cat wasn't a gag. It was real, and it was—ghastly. But it wrenched him in the same way, the torturing despair of not being sure, and then the moment of creative frenzy when power flowed into him, and he knew he had something.

He got his arms around his wife just in time. She'd dropped the weapon, and was beginning to sag when he caught her.

"You really hit the keys that time," he whispered hoarsely.

She was sobbing and clinging to him like a...a—Stunned, he waited, realizing that the shock and horror had jarred a gag loose far down, and it was coming up despite all his efforts to repress it.

She was clinging to him like a terrified little wood nymph in a wry Scotch nightmare.

"Eddie," she whispered chokily. "It was the past I blew a hole in. That was...that was—"

"I know what it was," Eddie soothed. "It was a saber-toothed tiger. They were big, weren't they?"

"Big—"

Betty-Jane's eyes were deep pools of liquid horror. "How...how... how can you...take it so calmly?"

"I'm not taking it calmly, B-Jane. But there's something in me— Did it have stripes? No, no, I guess it didn't. Asphalt pit saber-teeth are all petrified flesh and eroded bones, so it could have surprised us more than it did. Now we know. It was dun colored, with red tusks and whiskers."

Betty-Jane was staring past him at the glimmering. It wasn't the only glimmering. Behind Eddie pulsed the first pale oval she'd blown in time. No, Eddie had said space-time. Inside the oval was time, was time—a bridge. It was time inside the oval—time to stop gnawing at her fingernails and trying to swallow her mouth, time to stop pretending she wasn't already quite mad.

Eddie was shaking her. "B-Jane, listen to me. If you crawled through into here, we can crawl back. But it had better be now! Those rents you blew through the back of the looking glass may fill in without consulting us. Where's that other—"

"Right behind you, Eddie."

Betty-Jane was getting her color back. She had wanted out desperately, but now that the first oval was in plain view behind her husband's right shoulder her eyes were shining and she was staring at the glimmering she'd blown in an opposite direction.

"Well, shall we get started?"

"You mean we—follow the tiger?"

"No!" Eddie almost screamed. "Are you out of your mind? I didn't like the old stand much once, but I do now. I've changed my mind in the last twenty seconds. It was—is much healthier for people like us than an age which includes the scenery inside a cat's stomach."

"Eddie how long ago were saber-toothed tigers?"

"Huh?"

"Please, Eddie, I want to know." Eddie stared at her. "Well, the *Machaerodus*, the typical genus of a group of long-tusked extinct cats commonly known as saber-tooths prowled through most of the Oligocene, the Miocene, and the Pliocene."

"In basic English, Eddie."

"Well, we are perhaps a half million years back. Or twenty million, depending on whether that tiger was a *Nimravus machaerodus*, or a *Hoplophoneus machaerodus*, and what Tertiary system age-scale you'd like for breakfast. There's a terrific disagreement among the experts as to how old you'd be if you traveled through any one age just by aging. For instance, Sir Arthur Keith and Elliot Smith disagree—in a small way, of course—about how long ago was the Pliocene. Smith thinks the Pleistocene began a million years ago—Keith a quarter million. Of course they're not geologists, and—"

"I like Mr. Keith's estimate best, Eddie."

"A saber-tooth might find Smith just as appetizing."

Eddie had found that Betty-Jane could sometimes be placated by facetiousness. Even when it was forced and sounded hollow, it could sometimes produce an astonishing change in her. She'd stand back, and laugh at herself, and stop making appalling suggestions.

Sometimes a tiny grain of drollery served up with a straight face could do that for her. It couldn't now.

He knew what was coming before she spoke.

"Eddie, if we followed the tiger, how far back in time would we be?"

"Too far." Eddie scarcely recognized his own voice. It was hoarse with strain, and the effort it cost him to speak at all.

"Eddie, we could still go back to the old stand. The two ovals are only a few yards apart, and the one you like best will be here when we get back. You just now said there was something in you—it's in me too, Eddie. A desire to look beyond and all the way through—until we're too old to drag ourselves about."

“When you can know more, when you’re able to, you’ve just got to! Eddie, we’re going to follow the tiger.”

\* \* \* \*

Eddie never knew how he allowed himself to be persuaded. One minute he was standing with his feet firmly planted on the good late Pliocene earth; the next he was floundering through a bog of fluid time inside a glimmering.

It was awful and he hadn’t wanted to and—it was awful. He had to go down on his hands and knees and claw his way out.

Fortunately the ordeal was not of long duration, and only his temples were bursting when he tumbled out into the sunlight and sank in soft mud to his knees beside the Cyclopean beast which had preceded him through the glimmering.

The tiger was lying on its back with its short hindpaws buried in its stomach, and the blood which had welled up front the gaping hole in its breast had congealed to a red film covering it.

It looked even huger dead, and Eddie felt a little sick as he stared wildly about him.

He was standing in a bog much thicker than the one inside the glimmering, above him marched a red sandstone cliff, and closer to him than breathing was the girl he’d married.

“B-Jane, why wasn’t I...the tiger...why wasn’t I, the first time you blasted?”

“You weren’t standing directly in the line of fire,” came in a faint whisper. “That tiger was. Just the concussion or something must have blown you through into where we were before we came through into here. Eddie, get a grip on yourself—you’re not dead, so why are you trembling?”

Eddie wanted to believe her. But not helping him at all were the moon-faced painted devils. They were squatting on their haunches in a semicircle around the bog, as though hoping the two ugly-looking strangers with *no color at all* on their faces would just *try* and wade out.

Betty-Jane screamed when she saw them, floundering close to Eddie, and tugging frantically at his arm.

“Eddie, Eddie, ohhh—baboons?”

Even as she cried out Betty-Jane found herself wondering wildly how she could have clutched at such a straw. The creatures didn’t in the least resemble baboons except that baboons were pigmented just as gaudily in a less refined way.

They were as large as gorillas, barrel-chested, with long dangling arms and patches of red fur on their chests. But despite their hairiness they were clasping rude, flint-tipped wooden spears, and there was

something unmistakably human, or humanoid, in their expressions. A petulance tinged with curiosity, a kind of avaricious just-you wait and-we'll-know-all-about you look.

Blue-purple-orange were their faces, the baggy folds of flesh over their jowls giving them a weird otherness of aspect—giving *Eddie* the wild idea that he was staring at the inhabitants of another planet.

Then, suddenly, the truth struck him like a bomb from a rocket gun, shedding dazzlement in all directions.

“Dawn men!” he almost hissed.

“Eddie, they *aren't*. No, no, Eddie—their faces! They look like painted buffoons! It's just not possible—”

Eddie stiffened as though bracing himself to face the full impact of an onrushing nightmare.

“Bright pigmentation occurs pretty high up in the evolutionary scale,” he said, breathing hard. “There are blue-cheeked new world monkeys. The theory, of course, is that it has some erotic—”

“Eddie, don't—I can't stand it. The dawn men I've met in museums —”

“Not cogent!” he flung at her, almost savagely. “You're talking about hit-or-miss reconstructions. All museums have to go on are skulls and bone fragments. Skin pigmentation pure guesswork—from the Trinil skull to the Man from Broken Hill. For all we know there may have been big-brained Miocene gibbons which flaunted every color on nature's palette.”

Eddie's own color had ebbed entirely. “Great Scott, B-Jane! They're toting *worked* flints—”

“Is that good, Eddie? Does that date them?”

“No. It means they've jumped the gun on the archaeologists!”

“Eddie!” Betty-Jane shrieked. “Look out!”

The warning came too late. From behind the dead saber-tooth four insane blue-orange faces popped. There was a flutter of red-yellow palms, and a flint-tipped spear whizzed through the air to bury itself in Eddie's shoulder.

Eddie stiffened, a look of utter consternation on his face. Then—he flattened himself, gripping Betty-Jane's wrist and dragging her down into the muck beside him.

His shoulders almost flush with the muck, the spear quivering in his flesh, he started to edge toward the glimmering on his hands and knees. The oval was less than a yard from the cliff wall, and protecting him in the opposite direction was a towering wall of dead tiger.

There were guttural whisperings from beyond the crest of that lesser barrier, but no more spears came hurtling toward him. To Betty-Jane, advancing at his side, it seemed incredible—the sheerest, most primitive kind of stupidity.

The dawn men actually waited, hardly making a sound, until Eddie was so close to the oval that his shoulders were etched against the glimmering, and *only then* came swarming down over the belly of the tiger toward him.

Betty-Jane fired without taking aim, swiveling about in the muck, and sloshing the gun upward between her elbows.

The concussion splattered mud in all directions, lifted up the inverted beast, and hurled Eddie forward through a splotch of furiously pin-wheeling carnival colors dissolving in a blaze of light.

\* \* \* \*

There were times when Eddie found himself inwardly dynamiting the entire creaky structure. The House which Freud and Jung had built so laboriously, with a dash of paprika from the bad boy down the street. Watson was the bad boy, and he, too, had missed the boat. The behaviorists denied, categorically, that there was such a thing as the unconscious. You thought with your throat muscles.

Good—a telling jab at the great black hinterland which was supposed to lurk somewhere inside a man. He, Eddie, just didn't believe in a subjective hierarchy of infantile repressions... Not in the Freudian sense, he didn't.

No sensible man repressed his inmost thoughts, or was ashamed of them. Yet sensible men had phobias.

An over-simplification?

Bah! the house was creaky from cellar to attic. Watson was right—but horribly wrong. The human infant doesn't just start off with throat muscles. It starts off with *instincts*. Instincts, bundles of them. Inherited instincts. And why not? How could Freud have missed it? Children at play don't secretly want to murder their great-aunts. They want to wriggle their ears, scratch themselves furtively under their armpits. A long infancy, a long learning period—no instincts? Bah, they want to crinkle their coccyxes. No—the plural is coccyges.

Warmth. On his eyelids, on his throbbing throat. A tugging and a whispering.

"Eddie, you're not hurt—just shaken up. I've got it out. The flint's out, Eddie. But you won't have to look at it. It's in the lake. Eddie—this is *paradise!*"

Eddie opened his eyes. He couldn't believe it at first. The vegetation was a deep emerald green, luxuriant, but not lush, the air balmy, the sky flecked with little fleecy clouds, and, as though that were not enough, the sunlight that was warming him through his clothes sparkled on the waters of a jasper lake so still and lovely it brought a catch to his throat.

"Oh, Eddie, Eddie, it was worth the nickel. It was worth it, and I'm



glad they attacked us. I'm glad they swarmed down without giving us a chance to stop and think."

"Nickel?" Eddie said slowly.

"You know what I mean. We've silenced the juke box. In the right kind of juke boxes there are blank records. If you want peace for five minutes, you put a nickel in and tunes stop coming out."

"Oh."

"Eddie?"

"Yeah, what is it?"

"We'll go back. All the way back to where it *isn't* peaceful. We'll have to because everybody we know is back there, and if we stayed here we'd be running out. But just let me sit here a minute, and drink this in. Then we'll go back."

"Will we? Aren't you forgetting those carnival-faced semi-apes we left squatting around the hole you blew in the other side. They'll be waiting to pay us out. They may even try to come through into here." Betty-Jane paled. "Eddie!"

"No, I guess they won't. Dawn men feared the unknown, and those glimmerings will be taboo to them. Taboo, in case you don't know, is the custom of setting aside certain persons or objects as sacred or accursed. Those ovals are objects and will be sacred. But we're persons, and if we step back through and get 'em all steamed lip again —"

Abruptly Eddie did an incredible thing. He reached over and pried the gun from his wife's cold clasp.

"B-Jane, what makes all of the rare old coins come out of the bottom slot?"

Betty-Jane was staring at him wide-eyed. "I don't know exactly, Eddie. I just sort of played by ear—the way you did when you figured out where we're not."

"Like this?" Eddie asked, moving his fingers back and forth over the stock.

"Eddie, be careful. You'll—"

Eddie had intended to be careful. But something he had no control over deep in his mind, a racial, hairy-chested something that had a deep instinctive horror of going soft, had its own ideas about paradise.

An earth-shaking concussion moved sideways from Eddie's right knee, lifting up his wife, and hurling her with great violence into a glimmering out of sight.

"Eddie, Eddie, I can't stand any more of this! Neither can you. Take me home, Eddie."

Eddie felt dizzy from having floundered through a dozen glimmerings into ages that were terrifyingly remote. He hadn't intended to fire the gun again and again and again, but every age he'd

entered had made him lose his head. They'd been simple accidents and complex ones like that carnivorous dinosaur. Not a Tyrant King, but a very slender, malign little allosaur with withered red forelimbs and a carrion stench. Hideously it had parried for an opening, hissing and dodging about with its forked tongue darting in and out.

They'd gone through from there to meet a dragon fly with a wing span of eighteen feet, and a calamite fern so high up the bare little pinkish fronds growing out from it had made a dent in the stratosphere.

Twice he'd fired in sheer panic, when they'd been nothing tangible to put them on its menu, and compel them to move on. Once he'd given the gun back to Betty-Jane, and that had been a mistake.

The Ordovician landscape which now stretched in all directions from the tight little lava island they'd found on the far side of the thirtieth glimmering seemed chillingly unreal.

A reddish mist swirled about them, the air was sulphurous and almost unbreathable, and most of the distant volcanoes were mere truncated cones which had blown their tops. Those that hadn't gave off occasional dull rumblings and lava streams that looked—hot.

In utter silence Eddie gathered his wife up in his arms, and swung about.

Going back, there were so many ways they could have ended up as fossils that just passing from glimmering to glimmering turned Eddie's blood to ice. It was mostly touch and go, duck and run, with a clashing of teeth too close for comfort in more ages than Eddie could count.

In what was probably the early Eocene there was a distance of fifty yards between the glimmering, and they had to flatten themselves while a herd of tiny, four-toed horses—genus *Hyracotherium*—clattered past. They had to sprint wildly to make it in the late Eocene, when the horses were larger, and could have trampled them into the dust.

There was something in the Oligocene that should have been much further back. With slippery belly-gliding it had thumbed its snout at the paleontologists, and hung around until it was out of date. It wasn't—out of teeth.

Only Paradise hadn't changed, and when they stumbled back into it Betty-Jane gave a little sob and sank down at the edge of the lake without bothering to pluck out the spines an infuriated hedgehog platypus had hurled at her three ovals back.

"Oh, Eddie, oh—this is heavenly! I can't help feeling this age was made especially for us!"

"It's just an age like any other age," Eddie grunted, clearing the huskiness from his throat. "An age of luxuriant vegetation in the

middle Miocene. The Miocene was just right for our remote ancestors, so why shouldn't it seem like paradise to us? In the Miocene our kind of folk first started using their hands to develop arboreal dexterity, and an intracranial pressure area of dubious survival value."

Betty-Jane did not reply. She had turned about and was staring with dilating pupils at the light collecting in little pools on the shore of the lake.

It was to her credit that she did not become hysterical, did not even faint. She did feel a little ill, but it was a steely kind of illness such as a huge bronzed Amazon of a woman might feel after plodding home to her native village over a mountain of skulls.

When Betty-Jane's awareness wasn't focused on little chunks of reality, when it embraced vast vistas tragic in scope, she could be both strong and great.

"Eddie."

"Yeah, what—"

"You'd better brace yourself, Eddie. I...I don't know whether to tell you, or let you find out for yourself. Perhaps it would be less of a shock if you—Go ahead, Eddie, get up and *look*."

It didn't take Eddie long to discover that something he thought of course would be hovering in plain view was nowhere in sight. Of all the ages they'd traveled through the two pursing ovals had stood out like sore thumbs. Now there was only one thumb, and it beckoned toward the age they'd just left.

Under the shattering impact of palpably evident finalities the human brain will often fuse and act upon impulses on a lower level of consciousness. What Eddie did when he turned from the lake shore was so startling it took away Betty-Jane's breath.

He drew her into his arms, and held on to her tight. Then he kissed her and said, a little huskily: "You are beautiful, B-Jane. I don't think I've ever fully realized just how beautiful."

Smoothing her dark hair back from her temples he made a cameo-like life mask of her face, and stood a little away from her as though admiring his own artistry.

"Eddie," she said.

"Yes."

"I've always thought of you as, well—an escapist. I've found myself wondering whether you really cared much whether I am or not. Right now I'm not looking my best, and you're hurting my ears. Eddie, you're making me nervous—"

"I'm sorry, I—"

"All right, pin my ears back. But try not to forget we're completely trapped. How completely you haven't realized yet. If I'm a reality to you, I'm glad. You're going to need me, and we're going to need each

other. Without something very solid to hold on to we'll be babes in a very terrible kind of trap."

"I know," he said.

Betty-Jane seemed to be trying to spoil the mask he'd made of her. She'd removed herself from his embrace and was kneading her cheeks with her knuckles, as though the putty hadn't set right.

"Eddie," she said, suddenly. "In those imaginative science stories you tried to make me like, exactly what happened when people went back into the past. The paradox of time travel, you called it. Just how is time travel a paradox?"

Eddie stared at her before replying.

"Well, if you went back in time you'd change the past. Your mere presence in the past would set a new chain of events in motion. You've heard about the man—he's a bromide now in that kind of story—who goes back and kills his own great-grandfather."

"I haven't, but go on."

"Don't you see? If he killed his grandfather, he'd never be born, so how could he travel back and kill his grandfather?"

"I think I understand."

Eddie nodded. "There's your paradox. The most obvious solution is no solution at all. You assume the existence of numerous might-have-been futures, futures which still exist in a kind of ghostly dimension somewhere, running parallel with the strong, main-line future you're going back has changed. Science-fiction writers call them 'alternative futures.'

"But that just can't be the answer, because the instant you accept it exactly six hundred and twelve new paradoxes arise. The most sagacious writers do *not* accept it."

"What do they do, Eddie?"

"They accept the paradox, not the solution. They just go ahead and write a story with such a depth of imaginative insight that it comes out very beautifully in all respects. Because, if you'll think a moment, everything we do is a paradox, from the instant we're born. The white, cold light of the absolute turns prismatic the instant it plays over the little spot where we are.

"When we've called that spot reality we think we've nailed it down. But we haven't. We haven't at all. The right nails are very long and twisted, and are in other hands outside the scope of our perceptions. It has though...well, for all we know the main building may still be in the blueprint stage. Reality may be just somebody's wrong guess—a lot of overlapping calculations on a crumpled scratch-sheet, tossed aside for something that makes sense."

Betty-Jane was silent a moment. When she met Eddie's eyes again her eyes were shining.

“Eddie, I like that analogy. I like it. A few of those tossed-aside calculations *would* make sense. Why waste them inside a crumpled sheet? Why not lift them out, transfer them to a clean sheet—a new blueprint, Eddie?”

“Huh?”

“A new blueprint for the human race, Eddie, Eddie—or, Eddie, think! If everyone were like you, if everyone were like you from the very beginning those mean, acrobatic-clownish dawn men right up ahead would have no more chance of developing into real human beings than a gorilla would in the twentieth century. When the little, romping, gag-writing Eddie Keenans catch up with them the stage will be set, and they’ll be out in the wings.”

Eddie was so startled he scarcely noticed Betty-Jane’s sudden dropping of her suppositives.

“Eddie, there won’t be any wars of aggression; there won’t be any slave empires. The Eddie Keenans just aren’t *mean* like that. They’ll want to dream and sleep, and yawn and turn over and dream again. But they’ll work when they have to, when things get really bad they’ll work in inspired spurts. Oh, how they’ll work to hold and widen their bridgeheads.

“Lovely Utopias will well up from their unconscious minds, great, immortal gags, and they’ll make them stick. The Eddie Keenans are perfectionists. They’ll take an artist’s joy in making them stick. Nothing they’ll ever do will *really* make sense, but it’ll be beautiful. Oh, Eddie, it will be beautiful!”

Almost it seemed to Eddie that Betty-Jane was holding the new blueprint out in the sunlight for him to see. She was holding it out by waltzing around on her toes, her arms upraised above the living flame of her body’s grace.

\* \* \* \*

The dark-skinned Eurasian dwarf swung in between the big doors and crossed the room in six impetuous strides.

“Sit down, Mogor,” a steely voice said. “Sit down, and—let’s have it.”

The dwarf seated himself with vigor, and then—his confidence ebbed a little. He assumed an aggressively defensive attitude the instant he found himself staring into the Interrogator’s cold eyes.

“Move back—where your face won’t be in shadows. That’s it. Now, you followed instructions.”

The dwarf nodded.

“Good. Suppose you tell me exactly what happened in your own words. I should *prefer* not to interrupt you.”

The dwarf squirmed under the Interrogator’s probing stare. “My

instructions were to go back through the stasis my genetic twin—opposite blew in the First Glass Age, and recover the blaster,” he said carefully. “But—”

“But...pah! It is a synonym for failure.”

The dwarf paled, then decided to ignore the interruption. “Unfortunately two Glass Age primitives—a man and a woman—stumbled on the blaster. To be strictly accurate, the man found the blaster, brought it to the woman, and she—blasted with it, blew stasis ovals at half million year intervals for a distance of”—the dwarf hesitated—“possibly a half billion years.”

For the barest instant the Interrogator’s face was convulsed, as though a high-voltage current had touched off an explosion at the base of his brain. He shut his eyes, and endured—strong emotion, tormenting like a live coal, a thing unutterably shameful in a man whose decisions could not be questioned.

“I didn’t see the primitives at all,” the giant said quickly. “They were gone when I emerged from the stasis, but I discovered what had happened when I filmed the region over the subatomic displacement auras with a unified field detector. There was an unbroken trail of energy perfect body auras leading back into the past.”

“Well?”

“I trailed the primitives back to...to—”

The dwarf seemed to be having difficulties with his speech. His flesh had paled, so that his face seemed almost Caucasian-white, and there was stark fear in his eyes, a kind of ingrowing panic which seemed suddenly to overwhelm him, so that he faced the Interrogator silent-tongued, and with his lips wobblating.

“Well, well?”

“I followed them beyond...where it’s pure torment...to go. Two ages beyond, I steeled myself, I fought what is agony...just to describe. The feeling, you can’t, mustn’t...the ghastliness of not being right with yourself. It’s like a tight band—knotted around your mind—slicing deeper and deeper. The knots sink in—become embedded. You’ve got to get out fast.”

The Interrogator’s own flesh had paled, but so imperceptibly the dwarf was unaware just how deep an impression his words had made.

“I...I concealed an oval as far back as I could stand an agony that kept getting worse. I sprayed the oval over by crouching just inside a stasis they’d blown in an age of luxuriant vegetation far back in the Miocene. Now if they try to return to the First Glass Age they’ll never find the stasis. You’ve got to have an air-film detector to distinguish a sprayed-out stasis from the air around it, and—

“They haven’t got one. They’re sealed up very far back. That was all I *could* do. I had to get out fast.”

The Interrogator's fingers had closed around the compact little energy weapon he'd used to break the back of the dwarf's genetic twin-opposite. But there was something in his nature which made him shrink front inflicting irrevocable injuries on a man who shared a compulsion that was making his brain reel.

"Very well," he said sharply. "That's all—for now."

The dwarf sucked in his breath, started to speak, thought better of it, and swung about on his heels. There was an alarming unsteadiness in his gait as the big doors swung shut behind him.

For an instant the Interrogator stood as though stunned, watching the doors swing shut. A knotted cord, he told himself shakily, a knotted cord tightening and tightening was—a perfect description of the sensation *he* experienced whenever he tried to imagine what the remote past was like.

Why had a revulsion against the remote past been scared into his brain before he'd been conditioned to perform the duties of his high office? Why was the remote past so dangerous it had been blotted from the memory of the dwarf?

Well, well, he could find out easily enough. When he knew he'd no longer fear the remote past, and—he could go back himself, and take care of those two primitives.

His hands were shaking a little when he reseated himself in the examining unit, and vibrated the emergency disk of the COVERALL.

The droning which ensued was abruptly shattered by a coolly efficient voice. "COVERALL. COVERALL speaking. This is Correlator T G 46. What is it, Integrator V 236?"

"I have reason to believe THE PLAN is endangered by something that has happened in the remote past," the Interrogator said, striving to sound as though he were addressing a subordinate. "I should prefer not to go into details."

"What do you wish to know, 236?"

"I find I can no longer remember what the remote past is like. No, it is worse than that. There is an...an uneasiness when I just think about the remote past. I have a feeling that, if I actually went back to, say, the Miocene, and tried to blast a stasis oval the uneasiness would be worse. I say I have a feeling. Of course—

"COVERALL? COVERALL?"

There was no answer.

There was no reason why his palms should feel moist. Yet COVERALL'S silence was alarming. A minute ticked by, two—

"Interrogator V 236?" came hoarsely, as though COVERALL were cowering in darkness far off somewhere, willing in its panic to risk a quick look around a dangerous corner, but not daring to raise its voice.

“Yes?”

“This is Correlator T G 49. T G 46 is...well, not well. That blotting out of the remote past—it just doesn’t make sense.”

“No, it doesn’t,” the Interrogator agreed, his voice rising. “If it had, would I have called you? What right have you to take that tone with me?”

“No right, but—I can’t help you. When I think of the remote past it’s as though a bar of white-hot...*no, no, worse than that. I won’t think about it. You hear? I won’t, I won’t it’s horrible, and you can’t make me! You’ve no right—*”

The Interrogator groaned, and vibrated COVERALL out.

The implications?

No, no, he’d have to fight that. He’d have to stop picturing the past, all of the past, including the worst three minutes he’d ever lived through, as a...a tree.

An enormous spreading tree with all of the upper branches shriveling, dying. A tree already dead, with only the lower branches filled with sap. No, no, no, he’d have to stop.

Just a part of the trunk was alive, and there were little eager new sprouts down there trying to topple the dead upper part of the tree.

The lower part, where the sprouts were, went deep, deep down into the soil, so that the tree was really like a gigantic iceberg nine-tenths submerged. Only the upper part was dead, shriveled, but the upper part included the whole human race, and the sap up there where the human race was could no longer go down, down into the distant roots and interfere.

Something new was coming up down there, pushing its way up—small, twisting new shoots far down insisting on a right to grow and harden into branches and become a new tree with wide, lazy leaves, and a sun-dappled bole. A new—

The Interrogator’s thoughts congealed, and something took hold of him, and something whirled him around. Around and around and around, faster and faster, until on the circular top of the examining unit where his hands had rested were two stringy clots of filmy emptiness, and where his brain had pulsed a hollowness impossibly bright.

## EPILOGUE

“Junior!” came from the palm-thatched hut in the clearing. “Not tomorrow, Junior. NOW!”

Eddie stopped and stared down at his son, who was contemplating his toes in the sunlight, and squinting up through them at the swollen red disk of the sun.

“Junior, your mother is a very patient woman. You obey her now



and then, I suppose?"

"Yeah, sure. Why not, Pop?"

"Well, there's no reason why you shouldn't. I was just wondering."

"Pop, I've gone and figured out a poem for myself. Want to hear it?"

"O. K., Junior—shoot."

*"The sun goes down,  
And the moon comes up,  
But right where I'm sitting  
The earth, being round,  
Keeps chasing itself like a pup."*

H'd'ya like it, Pop?"

"Well, the rhythm and the astronomy ain't...ain't is basic English, Junior...ain't so hot. And you don't talk like that."

"Shucks, Pop, I just talk like I think."

"Yeah, well, it is kind of nice, Junior. You thought that up all by yourself, did you?"

"That's right, Pop."

"It was fun, wasn't it?"

"Yeah, but it was hard too, Pop. It made me sweat."

"You like to sweat, don't you?"

"In a way, Pop, at times—but not every day, Pop."

"Well, that's line, Junior. That's as it should be. None of the really big towns—Rome, London, New York—were built in a day."

\* \* \* \*

Soon now, soon, he'll be big and strong like his dad, thought the big little girl with the mud-caked cheeks and tangled, wild hair. Crouching in the long grass, her skin berry-brown in the red sunlight, her mind went back to the lonely years—before she'd found people like her own mom and dad again, after being so long alone for years and years and years. And that little boy who only came to her shoulder now but would soon be as tall as she.

Years and years, and deep in her mind was the strange dim memory still. An automobile upset in a ditch, and a bright, shining light on the road, and she a very little girl climbing through. Then another light and another light, and she'd kept on crawling through the lights and the woods between, the wild, wild woods with the ape creatures, and then—out into here.

And the funny dwarf with the bicycle pump and shiny clothes peering out of the last light, and making the light disappear. And the big ape creatures that had been mom and dad to her until she'd found people just like her real mom and dad had been back when she'd had

dolls to undress, and cornflakes for breakfast, and Perkins to talk to, and mom and dad playing bridge away off somewhere, and then coming home with more dolls and upstairs maids and bathtubs, and she'd had to wash behind her ears.

“Junior! Mary Ann!”

Oh, those brats, thought Betty-Jane, standing in the door of the hut in the clearing. Eddie's, and a green-eyed little minx that wasn't at all, even though she'd managed somehow to come running in out of the rain, trembling and afraid, and straight into her heart. A would-be glamour girl, and with Junior not yet forewarned. Six years difference in their ages too, and she setting her cap for him as though she wasn't just a silly little thing with wild twigs snagging up her hair.

# CRUSOE IN NEW YORK, by Ron Goulart

Originally published in *Rod Serling's The Twilight Zone Magazine*, March 1982.

He was standing there amidst hopeless idiots. The cold didn't faze them, nor did the slush underfoot. They were gathered there on late-afternoon Fifth Avenue—at least thirty of them, a pack of certified nitwits—staring into the bright-lit window of the D. Trumbo Bookstore. All of them ogling the pudgy lump of a man who was sitting in the window with a sickening smirk on his nondescript face. The microphone dangling over the small metal desk picked up the sound of his stubby fingers as they pecked at file keys of his battered portable typewriter, carried the sound, along with the typer's self-satisfied whimpers, out to the small crowd of imbeciles gathered on the chill late February sidewalk.

"You are watching one of America's favorite young authors at work," announced an unseen spokesman of the bookstore.

"Young?" said Barney Sears inside his head. "He's my age, which is thirty-nine almost forty. We were in college together, we have the same agent."

"...yes, you're enjoying the opportunity of watching the world-renowned Buster Menjou create a chapter for his upcoming novel of unbearable suspense..."

"That's the right word. Unbearable," Barney said to himself as he stood there watching the sorry spectacle. "And Jesus, the little toad can only type with two fingers." He jammed his hands deeper into the pockets of his seven-year-old overcoat. He was a tall, lank man, dark and lantern-jowled.

"...in our Trumbo window. Of course, we can't duplicate the spacious studio Mr. Menjou works in at his palatial villa on the fabled Riviera..."

"Must be the shady side of the Riviera. Buster's face is pasty and pale as a frog's belly."

"...otherwise, you're seeing him working exactly as he does in the privacy of his own..."

"Oh, so? Where are the piles of Ludlum and Follett novels that he swipes whole thick paragraphs from?"

"...during an unprecedented tour of his native country, Mr. Menjou will be making appearances in the windows of all four hundred and eighty-six D. Trumbo Bookstores across this..."

“Jesus, think of how many nitwits he’s going to attract. Let’s see, thirty times four-eighty-six is...well, a lot.”

“...remind you that every half-hour during his unprecedented display of creativity, Mr. Menjou will take a quick break to sign your copies of his latest book.”

“Two hours of creativity will use up all Buster’s got.”

“...forty-six weeks on the *New York Times* bestseller list, of course, is Buster Menjou’s *The Brinkerhoff Memo*. Trumbo’s also has, of course, copies of his latest paperback, which is now number two on the list, *The Hackensacker Blowoff*.”

“Who but an idiot would want to read books with titles like those?”

“...soon to be a major motion picture...”

“How can you make a major motion picture out of a minor novel?”

Barney was suddenly tapped gently on the back.

“You mustn’t take it to heart,” said a soft sympathetic voice. “Your work will outlive his.”

He swung around, just in time to see the blond young woman pushing away through the Buster Menjou watchers. “Hey, wait!” he called.

She kept going, a slim girl in her late twenties, wearing a crimson raincoat and matching boots.

Barney had seen her before, three times at least. Twice she’d been with a man, a big guy all muffled up in a dark overcoat, scarf, and ski cap. Barney had the feeling they were watching him, following him, and had been for at least the past week or so. The girl was pretty and the one he always noticed first. She’d showed up at the Mexican restaurant in the Village six nights ago, the night he’d had the quarrel with Olympia and barreled out of the flat to dine alone. And just three days ago, when he was crossing the wide lobby of the Dibble Building on Lex after visiting his agent, she’d been buying breath mints at the cigar stand. Yesterday, he’d decided to start jogging again, and she and the muffled guy had been on a bench up in Central Park. Now, today, she’d spoken to him.

Barney stumbled, slipping on a mound of slush and nearly falling off the curb and into the slick street. He kept his balance, though, and started running.

“How does she know I’m a writer, too? They never put author photos on the kind of paperback crap I write. I don’t loiter around in shop windows either.”

The red raincoat was easy to keep track of. The blonde was roughly a half block ahead of him, hurrying along late afternoon Fifth Avenue.

“I have hardly any fans at all. So, now I meet one and she runs

off.”

He increased his pace, dodging pedestrians, pools of slush, and a blind beggar. Two blocks up from D. Trumbo’s he caught up with her.

“I’m not a mugger, Miss,” he announced, taking careful hold of her arm. “Not a flasher, sadist, chain stealer, or nonspecific loon. But you spoke to me and—”

“I shouldn’t have. It was a viola—a mistake. I’m sorry.” A delicate flush touched her pretty face.

“Not a mistake since you seem to know who I am.” He kept hold of her arm and walked briskly at her side. “Some writers, like that egomaniacal Buster Menjou, can be nasty with fans. I, on the other hand, like to talk with mine. What few fans I have.”

“You mustn’t let people like Buster Menjou bother you,” she told him, slowing. “Don’t allow his fleeting success to upset you.”

“That little schmuck has earned near sixty-four million in the past seven years.” Barney was breathing through his mouth. “I don’t mind when I hear a Rockefeller makes that, or an Arab oil sheik, but Buster I went to school with, and—”

“The University of Bridgeport, I know.”

“You do?”

The young woman said, “I’m a student of twentieth—an admirer of your work, Mr. Sears.”

“Really, I didn’t think that anybody... That is, I do get quite a bit of fan mail, but most people don’t seem—”

“It is a shame isn’t it? Not to be recognized in your own time.”

He was studying her face, her profile, as they walked along. “You’ve actually read some of my books, you aren’t kidding me?”

“I’ve read them all,” she assured him. “Including the entire *Thrillkiller* series for Plaza Paperbacks.”

“You’ve read *The Bulgarian Sickie Murders* and *The Armenian Skewer Murders*?”

“As well as *The Japanese Ceremonial Sword Murders*, *The Eskimo Icicle Murders*, *The...* I’ve read all thirty of them.”

“No, they’ve only published twenty-eight of them so far. The other two haven’t come out yet.”

“I’ve read all that have been published. I just don’t count very well, I guess.”

“The series’ll be ending—has ended,” he said. “I have mixed feelings about the books. Even though they were hack work, I tried to put some—”

“You succeeded, Mr. Sears. Everything you write has a special quality,” the young woman said. “You mustn’t undervalue your talent.”

“I hope you’ll get to read the latest book I’ve done. I just dropped

the manuscript off at my agent's this week," he said. "New approach for me. It's called *The Selkirk Syndrome*, an international suspense thing that's set entirely in Manhattan. I'm hoping—"

"*The Selkirk Syndrome*? That's not the..."

"Hum?"

"I'll have to make a note of that title. When will it appear?"

Barney laughed, shrugged. "Who knows? My half-wit agent, J. J. Dahl, has to sell it," he explained. "You probably don't know that he's Buster Menjou's agent, too. For that simp, he's made sixty-four million. For me, the best he's ever done is seventeen thousand in one year. If it wasn't for Olympia's collages we'd be in even worse shape financially."

"I'm curious about Olympia. That's Olympia Keech, isn't it?"

"Sure, but how do you—"

"You live with her, is that it?"

"We share a flat in the Village, on Emerson Street." He frowned. "I guess you'd call her my live-in love. In school I always figured I'd end up with a beauty, but Olympia's more on the dumpy side. Not that I'm a—"

"You're a very attractive man. You deserved...deserve better than Olympia Keech," she said. "Her work is dreadful as well."

He chuckled. "Yeah, I've always thought so too, but those nitwits at the Apocalypse Gallery get three hundred per collage," he said. "Imagine making pictures out of old candy bar wrappers. It's a unique art form, yet... Would you like a cup of cocoa?"

"I really shouldn't. I'm—"

"I put on my best suit today—only suit, actually—to visit a magazine that owes me two hundred dollars for an article on sadism through the ages," Barney told her. "When I wear my good suit, I like to go up to the Soda Shoppe in the Ritz-Gotham for a cup of cocoa. Three-fifty a cup, but I love the atmosphere. Reminds me of a soda fountain in New Haven when I was—"

"That'd be Crouch's Malt Shop?"

He stopped dead on the twilight street. "How the hell did you know that?"

"I'm doing... I've studied your life and work," she said. "I think that if you enjoy an author's work, you ought to take some interest in his life as well."

"I don't give out many interviews. Once in a mystery fanzine, called *Fatal Kiss* or some such, I talked a little about my childhood. Don't remember mention—"

"That must be where I read it, yes."

"Now you have to come along to the Soda Shoppe. It'll be the next best thing to going to Crouch's, which burned down in the sixties."

She hesitated. Then, glancing once around, said, "I'd enjoy it, Mr. Sears."

"Great. By the way, what's your name?"

She replied, after a second, "Lizbeth Janny."

"Allow me to escort you one more block east to the Ritz-Gotham, Miss Janny." He held out his arm.

She took it, smiling.

\* \* \* \*

The phone in the shadowy loft rang seven times before the thickset woman grunted up from her drawing board, smoothed out her purple shift, and went waddling through the scatter of magazines, newspapers, and discarded clothes on the bare hardwood floor to the crippled little phone table.

"Hello. Oh, crap!"

"Olympia?"

"Just a sec. I stepped on a Baby Ruth wrapper and it's stuck to my foot."

"Candy bar wrappers usually don't—"

"This one I was intending for my latest collage, J. J., and it's got library paste clobbered all over it." Olympia Keech hopped on one fat leg, swiping at the colorful wrapper stuck to the sooty ball of her bare foot. "I hope you're calling about a check."

"Not exactly. Is Barney there?"

"Nope. He went uptown to try to badger a check out of some magazine or other. How come you, as his so-called literary agent, don't do that sort of—"

"I only handle books, Olympia. Of course, if Barney'd start selling to *Playboy*, *Penthouse*, *Gallery* and—"

"What about the check for *The Norwegian Ice Axe Murders*?"

"Any day now. When do you expect him back?"

She shrugged both broad shoulders. "He's been roaming a lot lately, J. J. He usually comes home by chow time."

"Okay, I'll be here another couple hours. Tell him to phone me."

"Is it about his new book?"

"Yeah, I just read the manuscript."

"You think it's better than the crap he's been doing?"

"All Barney's stuff is good, Olympia," said the agent. "Tell him I called."

"Sure thing. Send money." She hung up, squatted on the floor and plucked the candy wrapper free.

\* \* \* \*

"I really shouldn't be telling you all this," said Lizbeth Janny,

touching at her lips with the paper napkin. "It's just that..."

Barney was sitting across the marble top soda shop table from her, an odd expression on his face. "Buster Menjou," he said, snapping his fingers. "He knew I'd probably show up to see him flaunt his ego today, so he hired you to—"

"No, really." She reached across the table to touch his hand with her warm fingers. "We aren't supposed to discuss this sort of thing with a...a subject. It violates all the rules."

He scowled at her. "What's the name of the villain in *The Portuguese Harpoon Murders*?"

"Dr. Rowland Mephisto."

Barney said, "Son of a gun, you *have* read my books. Who's the Thrillkiller's first and only love?"

"Princess Irena Romanoffsky," she answered. "Believe me, Barney, this isn't a hoax. Ordinarily, I never talk to the people I'm researching. But since you...you looked so forlorn standing there on that cold sidewalk. Besides, since you're..."

"Since I'm what?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. I only meant that I don't think it makes any difference. My talking to you this way," she said. "I simply wanted you to know you've no reason to be jealous of Buster Menjou. Before this century is even over, his work will be completely forgotten."

Barney hunched, leaned closer to the pretty, blond young woman. "You know that for a fact," he said slowly, "because you live in the future, huh?"

"Exactly. Although to me 2071 is the present."

"I can see that. And you got here to my time by way of time travel, you said?"

"Yes, and I'm violating the Time Travel Overseeing Committee rules by admitting this to you," Lizbeth said, taking her hand away from his. "I let my heart outrule my head."

"We all do that. So you came from 2071, in a time machine, to do research on me?"

"I'm doing a series of vizbooks on major twentieth-century authors. Naturally you—"

"Sure, naturally."

She said, "It's true, Barney. In my time you're considered to be one of the best authors of this entire century. Your book *Crusoe in New York* is studied in every EdFac in the entire world. Not only in vizbook format, but in the old-fashioned printed format as well. You don't realize how important that book you wrote is to future gener—"

"I never wrote a book called *Crusoe in New York*."

"But you must have, because... That is, you will," she said, a frown



touching her face. "It wins the Pulitzer Prize."

He rocked in the wrought iron chair, laughing. "That's a nice touch. I'm going to win a Pulitzer."

"The book will, yes."

Barney shook his head. "I don't know exactly why Buster or whoever it was hired you to try this hogwash on me," he said, grinning at her. "I'm not a sci-fi nut, I don't believe in that kind of garbage. Why didn't you just pretend to be from *Time* or *People*? That kind of practical joke might work on me. With my vanity, I might just —"

"I'm not a hoax," she insisted. "I'm a qualified litresearcher from the twenty-first century. I never should have broken my vows of noncontact. But, as I say, you looked so forlorn and I thought a bit of consolation before you...at this time, wouldn't much hurt anything."

Barney watched her. "You're an attractive young woman."

"Yes, I know."

"You seem bright," he added. "You really don't have to lend yourself to cheap tricks like this."

"Believe me, Barney, you will be remembered as one of the great writers of your century," she said. "*Crusoe in New York* will be a fantastic bestseller."

"Or maybe just goofy," he said. "Sure, this is Manhattan after all. Next to Los Angeles there are more loonies per square inch here than anywhere else in the world."

"I'm perfectly sane," she assured him. "In my time we've virtually eliminated mental illness."

He scratched at his prominent chin. "I still don't see why you went to the trouble of reading so many of my books just to pull...who's that guy?" He pointed at the misted window of the Soda Shoppe.

It was the muffled man he'd seen with the girl before.

Lizbeth glanced over her shoulder. "He's my...traveling companion."

"Oh? He's not going to bust in and claim he's your husband? Nope, I guess that only works in hotel rooms and not in malt shops."

Lizbeth said, "I have to go now."

"With him?"

She lowered her voice. "He's not... I use him to make my jaunts in time."

"He carries your time machine?"

"He is my time machine," she replied. "An android with temporal-spanning equipment built in."

"I want to meet him." Barney pushed back his chair. "That'll prove that you've been—"

"No, it's impossible. If he were to tell TTOC I'd spoken the truth to

you, I'll never be able to travel again."

Smiling across at her, he said, "Right, that would spoil everything."

She stood. "I must leave. It's been very enjoyable talking with you."

"Good luck on your book. Vizbook, that is."

Lizbeth took two steps away from the table. "Don't go back to..."

"Don't do what?"

"Nothing. It would cause a chronic malfunction... Goodbye, Barney." She went hurrying out of the Soda Shoppe.

On the sidewalk she joined the man in the heavy overcoat.

Barney counted to ten, slowly, then rose up. "I think I better follow Liz and her time machine," he said to himself.

\* \* \* \*

"Christ, not again!" Olympia went lumbering to the phone, snatched it up. "Yeah?"

"Hate to keep bothering you, but is he back?"

"Just a sec, J. J." There was a Mounds wrapper clinging to her wrist. Catching it in her teeth, Olympia yanked it off. "There. No, Barney's still out moping around in the slush somewhere."

"I'll be in my office another hour."

"I'll tell him as soon as he pops in. Bye."

\* \* \* \*

Barney shivered. It wasn't the cold. It was what he was watching through the trees. He'd followed the girl and the muffled man into Central Park, unseen by them. The pair had cut across the field and into this wooded area. They were alone in a small, empty clearing, unaware that Barney was watching.

The man had opened a thick coat and then pulled aside a blue shirt. Instead of flesh there was shiny metal showing. Metal dotted with dials and knobs.

Lizbeth was manipulating those knobs and dials now.

The man, or whatever he was, was making humming noises. Not a human sort of humming at all.

Lizbeth linked her arm with his. She reached across his chest, flipped a final switch. The humming grew louder; the two of them began to shimmer.

Barney found that his teeth were rattling. Lizbeth was fading. So was her time machine. There was a keening sound and they were gone.

"Holy Jesus!" he exclaimed, straightening. "It's true. It's all true."

Laughing, grinning, he left the park and headed for the darkening Fifth Avenue. "I must look like your typical New York loon."

No matter. He was elated. All he'd always known would happen was going to happen. He'd be recognized as the excellent writer he was. There'd be celebrity, money. All the money he needed. He could write only what he wanted, no more hack stuff. He could (that was an interesting notion) dump Olympia.

There was the D. Trumbo Bookstore. That oaf, Buster Menjou, was still in the window putting on his show. There were still a couple of dozen people watching on the slippery, slushy sidewalk.

Barney, hands in the pockets of his overcoat, pushed up close to the large glass window. "You just wait, schmuck," he said to Buster in his head. "I forgot to ask her where or when, but as soon as I write *Crusoe in New York*, I'm—" He didn't hear the runaway taxi until it was nearly on top of him.

The car skidded wildly on the slick street, jumped the curb, and came roaring through the crowd in front of the bookstore. It hit Barney hard, driving him right through the shattering window. He died sprawled across Buster Menjou's desk.

\* \* \* \*

"I'm going to disconnect that frapping thing." Olympia hefted herself over to the phone. "Now what?"

"Is he back?"

"Not yet, J. J.," she told the agent. "Could be he's going to have dinner out someplace."

"Listen, I'm going to close up shop," said J. J. Dahl. "So why don't you give Barney a message and he can call me first thing tomorrow."

"Just a see while I get a pencil." She bent, huffing, and sniped one off the floor. She used a spare candy wrapper as a memo pad. "Go ahead, shoot."

"Tell him I really like his new book."

"Good, that'll cheer the old sourpuss up. For a few minutes anyway."

"The only thing is," continued Dahl, "I don't like the title. So suggest to Barney that instead of calling it *The Selkirk Syndrome*, I want to call it *Crusoe in New York*. Okay?"

"He won't care, so long as you can sell the damn thing," said Olympia and hung up the phone. Picking up a bubble gum wrapper, she returned to her drawing board. "How am I supposed to get any serious work done with all these distractions?" she sighed.

# TIME TRANSFER, by Arthur Selling

Originally published in *Time Transfer and Other Stories* (1956).

*“As a sleep I must think on my days.  
Of my path as untrod, Or trodden in dreams—”*

Yes, he was able to carry on the verse he had started as the switch had closed. He was still here—wherever here was—

*“—in a dreamland whose coasts are a doubt:  
Whose countries recede from my thoughts as they grope round about”*

What, he wondered, were the others thinking of at this moment? He thought to call out, to see if they answered, to see if they were still there—wherever there was.

But none of the others had called out. Or, if they had, he wasn't able to hear them, in which case it wasn't much use for him to shout. Or they hadn't, and he wasn't going to be the first. His voice might ring despairingly, ragged with panic, in the darkness. After all, he was their leader.

Leader! He chuckled inwardly. It was absurd, really. The whole thing was absurd—the solemn handshakes from the young man in the sober grey serge, the terse wishing of good luck as the moment of departure drew near. Departure? That was too easy a word. The right one was eviction.

And how did it go on?

*“—And vanish and tell us not how.”*

Now that was appropriate. Strange that he should be reciting to himself a verse he had long ago forgotten. More—that he couldn't even remember ever having learned. Yet it was fitting; a piece, he thought, with the ends of so many other poets. How more appropriately could Rilke have died than in agony from the infected scratch of a rose? Or poor, mad de Nerval than by hanging himself upside down, like the Hanged Man of the Tarot pack, in a Paris sewer?

This was far less dramatic, more in keeping with the age that had turned him and the others out, but it was, he told himself, right in the tradition. Most poets were a pretty poor lot at managing their lives, but they usually seemed to get in a good piece of arranging at the finish.

*Finish?* But this wasn't. It was dark and silent and there was no feeling of ground beneath his feet. But this wasn't the finish—not yet, anyway.

Out of confusion of decades, the continuing lines broke through:

*“Be kind to our darkness,  
O Fashioner, dwelling in light,  
And feeding the lamps of the sky—”*

His memory petered out at the same instant that he realized the darkness had lifted slightly and he was standing on solid ground again. It was still dark, but it was the darkness of night, not the absolute darkness of—wherever it was they had been.

He was conscious of several dark shapes standing by him. For a moment, they were hushed. He counted them. There were five. So they had all arrived. And he realized that this was why they had been silent. They had been counting, too.

Now they spoke and somebody fumbled for a torch. The light went gaping around the knot of old men, showing the fallen cheeks, the bald and the white heads, the bleary, surprised eyes.

“Well, we got here.”

“But it’s dark.”

“All I could think of while I was out there was that I’d left my false teeth behind.”

“Hah, that’s a good one.”

“Jeez, but it’s *cold*.”

The last statement brought realization to them all. They were chilled not only by fear and uncertainty.

“Where’s the guy with the stove?”

Hawkins, the poet and the leader, looked down. Yes, the pack was at his feet, just as it had been when the switch had closed. He bent down and unzipped it. He lit the stove with hands that trembled from cold and tension. The men huddled around it, crouching, rubbing their hands, white plumes of their breath disappearing upwards over the heat it gave forth.

“Mm-mm. Good piece of equipment.” That was Bell, the old colonel. His voice still had the clipped quality of the professional officer. “Almost as good as the Mark Nine.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been as cold as this,” said Green, the carpenter.

“Perhaps there’s been another Ice Age,” Hawkins suggested.

“Not in seven hundred and fifty years.” Who was that? Oh, Lindsay, the professorial-looking little man. Hawkins realized that he didn’t know anything about him. There was no reason, of course, why he should. But he did know something about the others. They had chatted during the few minutes before they had been gathered into the chamber. Bell, Green, Hasse, an electrician. And Ez, whose surname hadn’t been known even to the clerk. He’d survived one

appeal, he had told Hawkins, and then, because there were no records, they had assessed him at retiring age, seventy.

In fact, as he had confided with a wink while the attendant reached for the switch, he was nearly eighty-three.

"How can you say it's seven hundred and fifty years?" That was Bell again, his voice peremptory and querulous. Hawkins smiled to himself. Must have been a blow to the poor chap, a leader of men, not to be leader now on this pathetic and untraceable excursion. Instead, he was under the command of a damned longhair. That's probably what he calls me, Hawkins thought, a damned longhair.

In the light of the stove, Lindsay's lips made a downward self-deprecatory gesture before he replied. "I heard—on fairly reliable authority—that it was seven hundred and fifty years."

"Nobody's supposed to know," said Bell, "nobody at all"—in a tone which implied the added words, "not even me."

"It's somewhere between two hundred and a thousand years, but the exact time's supposed to be strictly secret." *Strictly Secret*, thought Hawkins, *Top Secret, To Be Read and Destroyed Immediately*. That must have been the circle, the delight of Bell's rigidly military life. It was all over, but he still clung to it.

"Does it really matter?" Hawkins asked mildly. "Now?"

Bell's eyes glared in the light. "Of course it matters. There have to be rules. Even in this business, everything should be above-board."

"Who cares about rules?" Hasse broke in. "I'm amazed that we've arrived, whatever century it is. I thought it was all a hoax, a handy kind of gas-chamber for getting rid of us dodderers."

Bell snorted.

"It's funny," Hasse went on, as if talking to himself. "All my life, I thought that everything any of the high-ups told us was a lie. Whenever a politician opened his mouth, or a scientist, or a general, I always took what he said with a grain of salt. A whole sack of salt. And now..." He shrugged, not entirely without humour. "I had to wait till now to find out that it wasn't all hokum. Not this time, anyway. Unless—unless this is—" He stopped short at the thought.

"*Death?*" whispered Green.

Ez tittered. "That ain't so. Don't know about you folks, but it wouldn't be as cold as this where I'd be goin'."

But nobody else laughed.

"It's all *wrong*," Green insisted. "It's heathen and unnatural." He was a quiet man who didn't look old the way the others did. He looked middle-aged, but as if he'd looked middle-aged all his adult life. "God didn't mean anything like this. He meant that men should live their lives out in a natural way, in the time and place He appointed for them. This way is plain un-Christian."

“From any viewpoint,” said Bell firmly, “it’s *unethical*. I never did agree with it. In the past few years, I’ve done a lot of lobbying against it. It’s just not ethical for one community to shift its burdens on to the shoulders of another.”

“Oh, I don’t know, Colonel,” Hawkins couldn’t help saying. “It’s only a kind of invasion. And this kind is peaceable, at least.”

“*Pah!*” spat Bell. “War is a matter of dire necessity and it’s the same for both sides. But the future never made war on us.”

Lindsay looked even more professorial as he leaned forward slightly into the light of the stove. “This *was* necessary. If it hadn’t been done in our day and age, there probably wouldn’t have been a future, anyway. And the future will know it. This future *now* knows about *us*. We’re a part of history to them. That’s why our time only chose up to a thousand years, with the time carefully spaced out. Don’t forget, little groups like us have been arriving for several centuries now.”

Bell stirred again at the easy confidence of the period of their projection. “You seem to be well acquainted with all this.”

Lindsay coughed self-effacingly. “Well, I am. You see I’m—I was, that is—a geriatrician.”

To men of a previous generation, the word wouldn’t have been so familiar. But even old Ez knew what it meant.

“One of the enemy, eh?” he wheezed.

Lindsay smiled uneasily. “Would you have preferred the Eskimo way, being turned out into the snow?”

“Wouldn’t have been much different,” said Hasse.

“This way,” Lindsay retorted, “we have a chance to live out the rest of our lives. *We’re* prejudiced because we’re the ones it happened to. It was bad enough before the Global War. Afterwards, with so much soil poisoned, so many mouths to feed, something drastic had to be done.”

“They should have had compulsory sterilization,” declared Bell. “That was the practical solution.”

“But *that* would have been unethical, an infringement of fundamental human rights. Anyway, it wasn’t the number of people that mattered. It was the number of *unproductive* people. We were the problem.”

“I was still working as well as ever,” said Green quietly.

“As quickly?” Lindsay asked just as quietly.

“I was a craftsman.”

“And I was a scholar. But there had to be one time for everybody. I was thinking in the last few years that I was really beginning to know my subject at last. And now...” His voice faltered. “This, in a way, solves all the problems I ever grappled with. Funny how the human

race always seems to turn up with an answer to its problems just in time. Come to think of it, being able to send people on a one-way trip into the future wasn't good for much else, was it?"

"The future!" Green repeated, his slow voice unexpectedly vehement. "I don't want to be in the future. The present was bad enough. Everything speeded up—quicker and quicker every year."

Hasse had been craning his neck, surveying the darkness. "I'm beginning to think there's something phony about this, after all. If the future had been expecting us, like Lindsay says, wouldn't they have got this area all fixed up? But I can't see sign of anything. No lights—nothing."

A sudden thought came to Hawkins. Perhaps the future had resented the influx of tottering immigrants from the past. Perhaps they'd developed the time-projecting principle, found a way of diverting them into some limbo that was neither past, present nor future.

"Jeez!" said Ez. "I've slept in the open more nights than not, but it was never as cold as this. If only I was *tired* and cold, instead of just cold, I might at least be able to get some shut-eye."

Yes, that was a problem for them all, thought Hawkins. It seemed to symbolize their situation. They had been sent on their way one sunny morning at nine o'clock, straight into a dark and bitter future night. He remembered an item of their communal pack, fumbled in its depths, among the first-aid equipment and emergency rations. He found what he was looking for and brought it out.

He smiled at the grotesque legality of it. The label read: *Supplied Duty-Free for Departers. For Medicinal Purposes Only*. He screwed out the cork and saw old Ez's rheumy eyes look up and glow at the familiar sound.

"Well," said Hawkins, "since it's obviously impossible to make a move before dawn, we might as well have something to warm us up." He handed the bottle around.

Only Green, when his turn came, hesitated. "I—I don't, that is, I never—"

"Medicinal," Hawkins interrupted reassuringly.

Green nodded gratefully and took a swig.

How we cling, thought Hawkins, to our little canons of respectability—even now! He took a gulp himself, recorked the bottle and stowed it back in the bag. Ez smacked his lips expressively and looked beseechingly at him. Hawkins rezipped the bag, feeling a childish pleasure in the meager power his office gave him. There was something in being a leader of men. Perhaps he'd missed his vocation and the little tin gods at the departure centre had seen his true worth, his latent qualities. He smiled. "Hawkins," he told himself, "you never



did have a head for liquor.”

But his thoughts ran on. What a stupid game it was, a stupid game for stupid old men. He could picture the serious reasoning that had gone into it all—the endless reports from sub-committees, the graphs, the charts. The doctrine of social workers: “We must ensure that the Departers have a proper sense of purpose. They mustn’t feel—unwanted. They must have a spirit of unity.” That was what they had said to him and the others. But wasn’t it the occupational disease of old people to feel unwanted? And *weren’t* they unwanted?

He himself had been living for thirty years on a reputation, included in every anthology of living poets—simply because he had still been living. He thought of the little party of admirers who had met at his place the night before departure, of how they had made half-hearted jokes about his being the first poet actually to meet posterity.

Someone had slipped a copy of his first book in his pocket and winked and said, “First edition. Be worth a fortune in the future.” He felt it in his pocket, thought of being a poet, thought of posterity, and found that he didn’t care two hoots.

Ez had started on a mouth organ, playing plaintive old hobo songs that had been hoary even in 1990. The wiry, wily old bird played them with gusto—and very badly. The others stirred angrily and told him to lay off, but he stopped only to wheeze that he wasn’t keeping anyone awake, was he, and went right on playing. The defiant strains of *Hallelujah, I’m a Bum* and *The Big Rock Candy Mountain* went fading into the black emptiness around them.

No one could play quite as badly as that by accident, thought Hawkins. Its badness was a work of art in itself.

Hawkins gave a sigh of capitulation and reached in the bag again. Ez lowered the mouth-organ and, as the bottle came around again, he put the instrument away with a grin of triumph.

Hawkins put the empty bottle back in the bag. Protected now against the coldness of the night and the chill of their thoughts, the little group huddled closer to the stove and settled down to await the dawn. One by one, they fell asleep. Only Hawkins remained awake, not because he was leader, but because he was used to brooding through the long, dark hours of the night.

But even so, dawn was a long time in coming. At the first grey relief from darkness, the others were all awake. Stretching, grumbling, they tottered to their feet. The greyness began taking on undertones of pink.

The sight made Hawkins feel even colder.

“Jeez,” cried Ez.

In the wan light, the landscape was desolate. Back in 1990, it had

been a pleasant enough spot, open green country that had escaped the ravages of war. But this was worse than the rubble of war. For here, as far as the eye could see in the half-light, was no sign of human habitation, no sign of *anything*. It was a bare, ashen desert.

"Not even a blade of grass," said Hasse in an awed voice.

Green began to sway and moan, his eyes rolling back. His lips moved. "And there shall come great desolation upon the Earth."

"God!" muttered Lindsay.

Hasse wheeled on him, his face twitching. "It was a hoax. I should have known better than to believe you damned experts. Why didn't you just kill us?" He stumbled towards the mild-featured Lindsay. His bony fingers clawed at Lindsay's coat collar, his throat.

"Stop that!" shouted Hawkins, surprising himself by the note of authority in his voice. It surprised him even more that Hasse took his hands away. But his face was still filled with bitterness and loathing.

"He didn't do it," said Hawkins. "It's not his fault." He could see from Lindsay's face that this—this desolation had come as much a shock to him as to the rest of them.

"What do you make of it?" he asked the geriatricist. Lindsay rubbed the heel of a hand across his brow. "I don't know. I really don't know. This is out of my department."

"Well, there's no use moaning about it," said Bell stiffly. "If things have gone wrong, we shall have to make our plans accordingly." In his voice was the immemorial fatalism of the military man, stoically carrying on despite the incompetence of armourers. Hawkins was grateful for the sobering effect of it.

"The city," Bell continued, "used to lie over there beyond the hills." But his pointing arm traversed a whole circle before it paused uncertainly and dropped. "There—there aren't even hills any more."

It was Ez who offered the only realistic suggestion. "Well, there's no help standing here in the cold. I'm for walking, now it's light."

"Sure," agreed Hawkins. "Somewhere there'll be a town and people." The only question was—*where*? No direction looked any less forbidding than the rest. "We'll travel east," he said firmly. At least they'd have the Sun in their faces—what there was of it.

Nobody objected. Silently, they turned their faces to the Sun. Hawkins stopped only to turn the stove off and swing it in the cold air till it was cool. Then he stowed it in his bag and slung it over his shoulder. The others slung on their smaller ration bags. And then they were walking.

Hawkins knew why they were walking, knew the thought that was in the minds of all of them, because it was in his mind, too. They would go on and on, trudging through this wilderness until they became too tired to notice the cold and the desolation, until they

dropped in exhaustion, and that would be the end. It would be release.

And so they tottered forth towards the red wintry Sun while it slowly rose.

Hawkins understood two things as they stumbled along. The first brought a smile to his lips. He knew now, as the communal bag weighed heavily on his shoulders, just why they had chosen him as leader. Not because he was a born leader—but simply and brutally because he was the strongest. The second explained why they had passed Bell over. For he walked with a limp. He did his best to conceal it, Hawkins saw, and did his best to conceal that he was concealing it, but it was too apparent.

After they had gone a short way, he stumbled on a rough piece of ground, spun and fell. His game leg stuck out helplessly, as if it weren't a part of him. It wasn't, Hawkins realized, as he stooped to help him up. His eyes and Bell's met for an instant. And for an instant, the barricade of military self-control dropped and the man looked out. A man who admitted his disability and smiled briefly in gratitude at being helped. And then he was on his feet and dusting himself off.

"Thank you," he said stiffly. "That won't happen again." The barricade was up again. But Hawkins felt better and sensed that Bell did, too.

The Sun cleared the horizon finally and seemed to hang there like a great bladder of blood. A wind rose now and picked up the dust, sending it in dismal eddies across the landscape. They went on, their pace gradually slowing. Hawkins began to feel the approach of ultimate exhaustion.

They had been going up a slight incline and Hawkins had not noticed it. And they had passed through a cleft in the bare rock. And below them...

"Look, a real city!"

"Hallelujah!"

It stood in the shallow valley below them, less than a mile away.

And they were running, staggering, stumbling towards it, like men in a desert tottering towards the mirage of an oasis.

They were almost there before they stopped on a single impulse, gasping for breath.

*"But there's nobody there."*

They felt it blowing out of the city, a wind of ageless antiquity. The city was built of uniform, hard, block stone and its buildings were still standing, undamaged. But they looked as if they had been buffed smooth by a giant hand. And that was the hand of time, of centuries... of *eons*.

They approached in awed silence, walking slowly—almost reverently.

They passed down a long street like mourners at a funeral.

“Wait,” said Hawkins. His voice rang almost blasphemously in the silence. “Something moved there.” He pointed at a glint of light between two buildings.

It was a fountain. In the age-old silence of the city, it played, pumping from some cistern underground. Watching it, grateful for some sign of movement, they did not notice the figure seated under a piece of eroded statuary. When it stirred slightly, they all jumped and faced it with a sharp drawing-in of breath.

“My God!” breathed Lindsay.

The figure was small. It looked like a five-month foetus, its head great and wrinkled and hairless. Its eyes looked upon them without wonder—without interest even. It seemed *incapable* of hostility.

Hawkins advanced falteringly towards it. He was conscious of the rest shuffling behind him, grouping at his back.

He said, “Good morning.”

The creature did not speak. It inclined its head very slightly, but that might have been coincidental.

Hawkins felt silly, but he added, “Greetings,” feeling that to be more formal and thus more correct in a situation like this. “We come from the past.”

Hasse grumbled in his ear, “We’re not on Earth at all. We’ve been shifted in space, not time. This is Mars, I bet.”

Still the creature before them did not speak. The only expression in its eyes was one of utter weariness.

“This is Mars,” Hasse said again, eagerly. “It’s colder on Mars. I remember reading—”

“This isn’t Mars,” stated Hawkins. “The Sun wouldn’t look as big as this on Mars. This is Earth, all right—but in God knows what remote future. Something must have gone wrong with the projector. Or maybe the calibration is only window dressing or guesswork. This isn’t seven hundred and fifty years in the future. It’s millions!”

“And that, then?” Lindsay said, gesturing at the hunched-up figure by the fountain.

“Jeez!” gasped Ez. “He looks a thousand years old.”

“Why doesn’t he speak?” Hasse asked.

“Perhaps he hasn’t anyone to speak to any more,” said Lindsay thoughtfully.

“We’re here. He could speak to *us*.”

“In English?”

The thought that a language called English had faded back in the depths of time shocked Hawkins at first, then made him feel strangely

glad, light-hearted, relieved at last of a heavy burden. He remembered all that wrestling with words to convey this or that shade of meaning. Once it had seemed so important, so desperately important. But now it took its insignificant place in the dust of the ages. All the striving, all the poetry and music, all the machines, all the great philosophies came in the end to this—an old, old man, sitting in front of a fountain, watching the waters playing.

Was that all? Had Man never done all those things he was going to do? Was he never to find the secret at the heart of atom and universe, send ships to the stars, become wholly good, wholly wise?

Lindsay began to laugh. He stopped to gasp, “Age! I never knew what the word meant.”

Hawkins dazedly knew that that was the way they were all feeling. Old men cast out from a young and struggling world, they were the youngest ones alive—by years, centuries, eons!

All of them straightened, their backs unbent from the load of years. And when Ez pulled out his mouth-organ, they skipped to the music like six-year-olds. Even Bell. Even Green. They joined in the chorus like kids at a picnic.

*“For an old man he is old,  
And an old man he is grey,  
But a young man’s heart is full of love.  
Get away, old man, get away!”*

Hawkins frowned uncomfortably for a moment, feeling the irreverence of it. After all, that man might be the last man—the very last.

But the figure seemed not to hear them. It just sat there, looking into the fountain, as unnoticing as an old man on a park bench might be of children running and playing around him.

# I DID NOT HEAR YOU, SIR, by Avram Davidson

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Bloodgood Bixbee knew nothing about art, but he knew what he didn't like: What he didn't like, he said—loudly and with much profane redundancy—was Bein' Played For A Sucker... See?

Milo Anderson saw, all right; he knew he should never have sold Bixbee the unauthenticated Wilson Peale, anymore than he should have collected in advance the five percent of the contract which he could nevexdr negotiate. But there were so few people left in the capital whom he could still expect to swindle...and he needed the money. He had counted too much on Bixbee's not being able to admit participation in an illegal deal, and it certainly wasn't the moral aspect of not telling the rich lumberman about the cloud on the picture's title which worried him. In fact, nothing about Bixbee had worried him at the time—for who, back in Qualliupp, Washington, would know a Wilson Peale from a citron peel?—all that concerned him had been getting the check to the bank in time. And then to the phone...

Checks, checks, telephones, telephones, and...

Damn them all, with their greedy open hands and yapping mouths.

*Big crooks have littler crooks to bite 'um  
And so on down, ad infinitum.*

Wasn't Bloodgood Bixbee a crook, stealing lumber rights and ravishing the forests with a ruthless hand? Sure he was. And then following the classic pattern of trying to set himself up as a man of culture, with Genuine Oil Paintings on his walls. How the *Hell* did he find out, anyway? Was it possible that even Qualliupp had in it someone like Edmond Hart Ransome, from whom Milo had gotten the picture? No, impossible. The whole State of Washington was too new to interest old E.H.R., who seldom concerned himself with anything later than the end of the 1700's.

Anderson ran over in his mind the list of those with whom he had done business. Some one of them—there had to be at least *one*—would be in a mood to help him now, to advance money against future cooperation.

He dialed an unlisted number, tried to swallow. A man's voice, very quiet and cautious: "Yes?"

“Ovlomov?” He must not seem too—

“Who is this?” the voice inquired. A man with whom Mr. Ovlomov had done business? Didn’t he know that Mr. Ovlomov had returned only that day to his homeland? He should follow the newspapers—No, no—he, the one speaking, was not interested in Ovlomov’s contacts. Nor would it be of any use to call again: the number was being discontinued: Ovlomov was indiscreet.

So that way—the way of being a tenth-rate spy pretending to be a third-rate one—was out, and he was no closer to being clear of his snarl of checks and phone calls: people he was blackmailing (but only able to get small sums from), people who were blackmailing *him* (and getting large sums). For a while he had had an easy stretch, living at old Ransome’s place.

The lease was up in a few days—another problem.

It wasn’t as if the painting wasn’t his; Ransome had left it to him, it was clear enough in his will. That was the devilish part of it—before simply stating “and all the rest of my property now located in my apartment,” the old man had “left” him, had specifically named, every single article Milo had stolen from him. He had *known*. “And this bequest I make for a reason well known to my secretary, the said Milo Anderson.” Rubbing it in. *Always* rubbing it in. “*Fast horses and slow women, eh, Mr. Anderson?*” That sort of thing.

Perhaps it would have been better not to have meddled with the old man’s medicine bottles—but it was *so* easy—and so soon after the doctor had called; no trouble about a death certificate... *All the rest of my property...for a reason well known to the said Milo Anderson.*

But little enough property was left in the apartment by now.

By now everything was coming all at once. Bloodgood Bixbee wanting his money back and raving raw head and bloody bones if he didn’t get it. Big Patsy the bookmaker wanting the markers to be made good, wanting it right away, not threatening but promising. And Mrs. Pritchard, her voice like half-melted margarine: “Carried you on the books a long time, Milo—been good to you—we all’ve been good to you. Now we have to get the money because the Syndicate goes over the books tomorrow, and you know what *that* means, Milo.”

And he knew, oh, he *knew* all right. Even before the phone rang and the voice—an ordinary coarse unlettered unviolent sort of voice, saying its say as the cabbie might ask Where To or the laundryman announce the bill—Anderson: Get it ready, get the money ready, we’ll pick it up (by now the voice a bit bored with so many routine calls) as soon after midnight as we get around there...

Milo Anderson’s eye ran hopelessly around the apartment. Over the mantelpiece (or over where the marble had been before he’d sold it) was the faded place where the alleged Wilson Peale had hung

before going to take its place over the silent hi-fi set in the Bloodgood Bixbee place in Qualliupp (who'd bother with hi-fi when the TV offered such quality fare?). The cabinet of old coins had stood over there—the Pine Tree shillings, the “York” pieces, halfreales, the dismes: all sold by now, and sold well, but the money long ago (it seemed long ago) spent... Big Patsy, Mrs. Pritchard, and all the others... Edward Hart Ransome's place had been stuffed with the treasures of the late 1700's, but almost everything had been sold or pawned by now except for a few pieces of essential furniture. These had been already priced and would bring only a fraction of what was needed.

Milo Anderson was not more fearful than most men, perhaps he was a degree less fearful. But there were too many things piling up just now. Everybody was putting the screws on him and there was nobody he could squeeze in turn—not *now*—not *tonight*... Like a hungry man who opens and reopens icebox and pantry: there must be *some* food left, only let me look once more: Milo roamed the shadowy apartment, looking and peering and hoping and fearing, something to sell, something overlooked, *something*...

With sweat cold on his back and with kneecaps articulating far from firmly, he pawed among the discards the dealers had left. Bellows, wood-carders, trivets (“Three for a quarter on the Boston Post Road,” the dealer said.), apple-corers and nutmeg graters, new model spinning wheels...and *this* damned thing. Whatever *it* was. The dealer had simply laughed. Milo was about to kick it. He groaned, sighed heavily, listlessly began to examine it.

Basic design was a cabinet, smallish box, done—he peered closer—in curly cherrywood, a favorite wood of the period. It stood on four legs and on *one* side was a little wheel and on the *other* side, just sticking out, was a curved copper or brass...funnel, was it? He twisted the metal horn, it moved under pressure. He turned the wheel. Nothing happened, and this was, of course, wrong: for no Colonial craftsman would have spent time making a device which didn't *do* anything. He spun the wheel again, and a bell tinkled inside.

Well, yes—a box had to have an inside. Why hadn't he looked inside? People (he pushed a stubborn peg) were always hiding money inside of... There. The panel slid open easily enough. The bell tinkled again, a tiny silver bell on a silver loop in an upper corner. A small black horn (calf? bison?) hung on a thong. Copper wires led from the small end of the horn, and parchment, like a tiny drumhead, covered the wide end. Wedged firmly behind a glass panel were two glass jars lined with metal foil.

The thing to do was to get a hammer and—the bell rang a third time. Death, he thought, was waiting, and here *he* was, playing with



an antique toy. He seized the horn, was about to tear it loose, then he put it to his ear instead. At once he dropped it and jumped.

"Your conversant, Sir?" That was what the horn had said in his ear. Or was it, "You're conversant...?" What was the apparatus supposed to be, a music box with vox humana, a primitive phonograph, a... No, if it resembled any piece of equipment he was familiar with, it was the telephone. Without stopping to rationalize his action in turning eagerly to anything which could divert him from his trouble, he thought, Let's see: Buffalo horn to ear, speak into...mm... copper tube (funnel, trumpet) on outside. Feeling a bit foolish, he said—what else *could* he say but: "Hello?"

The odd voice in his ear repeated what it had said before. Milo asked, "Conversant with *what*?"

"With *whom*, Sir," the voice corrected him; and then, as he remained baffled and silent: "I do not hear you, Sir. Pray consult the compendium, Sir, for the cypher of the conversant desired... Servant, Sir."

"Hello? Hello? Hey!" He even whistled shrilly, but there was no reply.

Putting the horn down he began pressing and poking around the box, and dislodged something from a narrow space under the shelf where the odd jars were. It was a small thin leather-bound book. He opened it. Obviously laid paper, linen-rag, age-yellowed and "foxed": brown-flecked...names, numbers...turn to the front...

THE COMPENDIUM OF THE NAMES, RESIDENCES, &  
CYPHERS OF THE HONORABLE & WORTHY PATRONS OF  
THE MAGNETICKAL INTELLIGENCE ENGINE.

Assuming—and a crazy-mad assumption it was, but here the thing stood in front of him—assuming that the telephone, or some long-forgotten precursor of it, *had* been invented in those days...But how could it still be working? Or was this some quirk of a few other off-beat antiquarians like old Ransome, to have their own odd-ball Bell System? Or was he simply out of his senses and imagining it all? Oh, well. He turned the page.

EXORDIUM. *The Artificers of this Device have spared neither Pains nor Oeconomy to obtain the primest Materials and Workmanship, the Cabinetmaking being that of Mr. D. Phyfe, the Leyden-jars and other Magnetick Parts are the Manufactory of Dr. B. Franklin, Mr. P. Revere has fabrickated the Copper and Brass, and Mr. Meyer Meyers the Pewter and Silver.*

SUBMONITION. *The Cypher of each Patron is listed Alphabetickally. Spin the Wheel and on perceiving the Tintinnabulation of the Bell, Inform the Engineer of the Cypher of*

*the Conversant desired, caveat. It is absolutely inhibited to tamper with the Leyden-jars.*

Still dubious, but certainly curious, so much so that he even forgot his own danger, Anderson looked through the book. Almost automatically his finger stopped at *Washington, Geo., Gent. Planter, Mt. Vernon*. He spun the wheel. The bell tinkled. He put the small horn to his ear.

“Your conversant, Sir?”

This time he was prepared. He cleared his throat and said, “Patriot 1-7-7-0.”

“Your servant, Sir.” Somewhere away another little bell began to tinkle.

“Say—Engineer?” Milo ventured.

“Servant, Sir.”

“Um...what’s your name?”

“There are no names, Sir.”

Trrrinnggg...trrrinnggg...

“Well, uh, what time are you in—or where are you?”

“There is neither time nor place, Sir. And it is not permitted to hold non-pertinent discourse whilst the engine is in use, Sir.”

Trrrinnggg...

Suddenly the parchment crackled and a deep voice boomed from the horn: “Ah heah you, Seh!” Milo swallowed.

“Mr. Washington?” Surely not yet General in 1770.

“Yes, Seh—and no thanks to you, Seh! What do you mean by it, you damned horse-leecher? Sellin me these *con* founded artifizid denticles—! Why, a wind-broken, bog-spavined *stallion* couldn’t get ’em comftable in his mouth!” The false teeth were heard clacking and grinding. The Patriot’s voice rose. “Haven’t ett a decent piece of butcher’s meat in *days*! Live on syllabub and sugar-tiddy! Plague take your flimsy British crafts—give me honest Colonial works, say I!” The outraged voice rang in Milo’s ear, then died away.

Mistaken for a quack dentist! Perhaps the only crime he never had committed. Milo wanted to call back, found he’d forgotten the number—the “cypher,” rather—but the place where it had been was blank. He shivered. The engineer’s voice responded to his signal. “What is George Washington’s cypher?” Milo demanded.

“That intelligence is not available, Sir. Pray consult—”

“But it’s no longer in the compendium!”

“Cyphers not in the compendium do not exist... Your servant, Sir.”

\* \* \* \*

Well, so much for the Father of His Country. Anderson had

discovered a hitherto-overlooked cause of the American Revolution, but a lot of good it did him. Once again, he realized his position. There was no one he could turn to—not in the present, anyway. Not knowing what else *to* do, he turned once more to the past. Spun the wheel, opened the little book.

“Your conversant, Sir?”

“Printing house 1-7-7-1...”

Trrrinnggg... The voice was brisk, still retaining after all the years a trace of the Boston twang.

“We must all hang together or we shall surely hang separately... What’s your need, neighbor? The colonies should and will unite, but meanwhile the day’s work goes on.”

“Benjamin Franklin, I presume?”

“That same, my friend. Job-printing? Nice new line of chapbooks for your pleasure and instruction? Latest number of *Poor Richard’s Almanack*? *Bay Psalm Book*? Biblical Concordance? Hey?”

“No, no...”

The voice dropped a notch, became confidential. “Just on hand by the last vessel to arrive in port, a French novel in three volumes...no? Make you a special price for *Fanny Hill*!”

“Dr. Franklin”—Milo grew anxious—“I need your help. I appreciate—I appeal to you—a Fellow American—” he stumbled.

The voice grew wary, then a trifle amused. “Nay, nay, I’m too old a tomcod to be taken with such bait as that. None of your Tory tricks. If you’re working for Sir William Johnson, now, tell him—”

“But—”

“Tell him I’m a loyal subject of the King until he proves otherwise. I do but propose a continental union against French Lewis, the Dons, and the savage Enjians—though if Providence doesn’t take most of these off our hands by rum and pox—”

Milo cried, “My life’s in terrible danger!”

“Sell you a nice ephemeris—you can cast your horoscope and thus see the hazards you must needs discountenance... Stove? Sell you a Franklin st—”

\* \* \* \*

Of course, the cypher had vanished from the book and from his memory. It was plain he was allowed but one call to each name. And time was running short: it grew close to midnight and he could expect to hear from the Syndicate about the money he owed Mrs. Pritchard—if Bloodgood Bixbee and his friends, or Big Patsy and *his* friends didn’t arrive first.

Well, no help from the Continentals: Try the Tories. Try the line he’d first used to approach Ovlomov: spin the wheel and hear the bell

ring... "Sir?"

"Slaughter 1-7-7-7... Hello?"

"I hear you, Sir." Cold, this voice, and smooth as an adder's skin.

"Sir Henry Hamilton? I'm a loyal subject of the King and I have information to sell..." He held his face close to the brazen mouthpiece. By now he had no slightest doubt but that it was all real: he would connive, he would—

"Oh, demn the loyal subjects of the King. I buy no information; I buy *hair*, Sir! *That's* how I make rebels into loyal subjects of the King, Sir! I buy their sculps! Have you some'at to sell, fellow? I pay top prices to encourage the trade—for the sculps of male Yenkees, two-pun-ten—female Yenkees, two-pun-even—infant Yenkees and disaffected Injians, ten shillin."

"Help me—help me get through to where you are—Sir Henry—I'll do—"

The Tory agent's voice grew cautionary. "Though, mind," he said; "mind they be well-cured, for if there's one thing I *cannot* abide, d'ye hear, Sir," he said with fastidious distaste, "it's a mouldy stinking sculp. *Fah!*"

"*You* can find out how, some way, there must be a way I can come over—"

The voice grew fainter. "Hair; not the whole head: just the *haiiirrr...*"

It died away altogether and while Milo watched the name faded from the page.

\* \* \* \*

One after the other he called them up. And one after the other, though they did not know who he really was, they knew at once that he was a rogue and a scoundrel. He could not make them understand, could not find out how to get from his time and place to theirs. Voices traveled it, why not bodies? Desperately he riffled the pages of his compendium. Another name leaped at him. *This* man would not repulse him. He spun the wheel.

"Your conversant, Sir?"

"Tammany 1-7-8-9. And hurry!"

"...Servant, Sir."

Trrrinnggg...

A babble of voices...laughter...the sound of a fiddler...

Milo's voice trembled. "Colonel Aaron Burr?"

The colonel's voice was soft as cream. "That same, Sir." Lay the cards on the table. "Colonel Burr, I'm a thief, a swindler, a blackmailer, and a traitor."

The colonel chuckled. "Eawd, but withal an honest knave... Nay,

babe, nay, my poppet, don't jump so when I—"

"I need your help. I need it now!"

"Ah, not tonight, me lad. Burr might sell his soul for gold, but he'd not move outside the door even to *save* his soul when a pretty wench is on his knee—Why so flushed, my sweet tapstress? Bodice tight? Let me loose it... Nay, don't slap my fingers. You know you love me..."

Was there a single name left in the book? (Only a few minutes to midnight.) Yes. One.

"Your conversant, Sir?" Milo licked dry lips. "West Point 1-7-8-0." This time no silver bell tinkled. Slowly and with abrupt bursts, as if blown by gusts of wind, he heard the sound of a ruffle of drums... A puff of yellow choking sulfurous smoke billowed from the coppery horn. Milo ducked his head.

"I hear you, Sir." The voice was infinitely weary, infinitely bitter.

Milo croaked, "General Benedict Arnold?" And he told the whole story. There was a silence, but he sensed the listener was still there. And finally—

"I *can* help you. Matter *can* pass the barrier of time and place. For the sake of my wounded leg at Saratoga, shattered and bloodied in the service of my native land, I will do my native land this last service." Milo babbled thanks. The bitter, weary voice spoke on. "For my treasons I received money, commissions for myself and sons, a pension for my wife. Dust, all dust and ashes... I ask in my will that I be buried in my Continental uniform—"

"But *me*, you said you'd help *me*—" And the clock hands almost—

"I shall do for you what I should have done for myself. My old trade, in Hartford-town, ere I turned to war, I learned—But it's too late now. I should have done it that night at West Point, before I wrote to poor Andre—" One of the Leyden jars shattered with a sharp crack, splitting the glass panel. He reeled from a blast of heat. Amid the dust and shards he saw a small round box.

"No!" he cried, pulling back. The clock began softly to strike the hour. An automobile drove up below, heavy feet tramped the hallway, stopped outside his door.

Without further hesitation he opened the box, thrust something into his mouth. He trembled, fell forward, grasping the wheel. The bell tinkled once. The pillbox lay to one side. "Ben dT Arnold, Hartford," the label said. "Licensed Apothecary."

Fists beat at the door, feet kicked it, rough voices called out.

The bell tinkled once more in the cabinet. "Your conversant, Sir?" a voice asked faintly. It repeated the question.

"I do not hear you, Sir," it said, at length.

"I do not hear you..."

# THE MAN OUTSIDE, by Evelyn E. Smith

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Nobody in the neighborhood was surprised when Martin's mother disappeared and Ninian came to take care of him. Mothers had a way of disappearing around those parts and the kids were often better off without them. Martin was no exception. He'd never had it this good while he was living with his old lady. As for his father, Martin had never had one. He'd been a war baby, born of one of the tides of soldiers—enemies and allies, both—that had engulfed the country in successive waves and bought or taken the women. So there was no trouble that way.

Sometimes he wondered who Ninian really was. Obviously that story about her coming from the future was just a gag. Besides, if she really was his great-great-grand-daughter, as she said, why would she tell him to call her "*Aunt Ninian*"? Maybe he was only eleven, but he'd been around and he knew just what the score was. At first he'd thought maybe she was some new kind of social worker, but she acted a little too crazy for that.

He loved to bait her, as he had loved to bait his mother. It was safer with Ninian, though, because when he pushed her too far, she would cry instead of mopping up the floor with him.

"But I can't understand," he would say, keeping his face straight. "Why do you have to come from the future to protect me against your cousin Conrad?"

"Because he's coming to kill you."

"Why should he kill me? I ain't done him nothing."

Ninian sighed. "He's dissatisfied with the current social order and killing you is part of an elaborate plan he's formulated to change it. You wouldn't understand."

"You're damn right. I *don't* understand. What's it all about in straight gas?"

"Oh, just don't ask any questions," Ninian said petulantly. "When you get older, someone will explain the whole thing to you."

\* \* \* \*

So Martin held his peace, because, on the whole, he liked things the way they were. Ninian really was the limit, though. All the people he knew lived in scabrous tenement apartments like his, but she seemed to think it was disgusting.

"So if you don't like it, clean it up," he suggested.

She looked at him as if he were out of his mind.

“Hire a maid, then!” he jeered.

And darned if that dope didn’t go out and get a woman to come clean up the place! He was so embarrassed, he didn’t even dare show his face in the streets—especially with the women buttonholing him and demanding to know what gave. They tried talking to Ninian, but she certainly knew how to give them the cold shoulder.

One day the truant officer came to ask why Martin hadn’t been coming to school. Very few of the neighborhood kids attended classes very regularly, so this was just routine. But Ninian didn’t know that and she went into a real tizzy, babbling that Martin had been sick and would make up the work. Martin nearly did get sick from laughing so hard inside.

But he laughed out of the other side of his mouth when she went out and hired a private tutor for him. A tutor—in that neighborhood! Martin had to beat up every kid on the block before he could walk a step without hearing “Fancy Pants!” yelled after him.

Ninian worried all the time. It wasn’t that she cared what these people thought of her, for she made no secret of regarding them as little better than animals, but she was shy of attracting attention. There were an awful lot of people in that neighborhood who felt exactly the same way, only she didn’t know that, either. She was really pretty dumb, Martin thought, for all her fancy lingo.

“It’s so hard to think these things out without any prior practical application to go by,” she told him.

He nodded, knowing what she meant was that everything was coming out wrong. But he didn’t try to help her; he just watched to see what she’d do next. Already he had begun to assume the detached role of a spectator.

When it became clear that his mother was never going to show up again, Ninian bought one of those smallish, almost identical houses that mushroom on the fringes of a city after every war, particularly where intensive bombing has created a number of desirable building sites.

“This is a much better neighborhood for a boy to grow up in,” she declared. “Besides, it’s easier to keep an eye on you here.”

And keep an eye on him she did—she or a rather foppish young man who came to stay with them occasionally. Martin was told to call him Uncle Raymond.

From time to time, there were other visitors—Uncles Ives and Bartholomew and Olaf, Aunts Ottillie and Grania and Lalage, and many more—all cousins to one another, he was told, all descendants of his.

Martin was never left alone for a minute. He wasn't allowed to play with the other kids in the new neighborhood. Not that their parents would have let them, anyway. The adults obviously figured that if a one-car family hired private tutors for their kid, there must be something pretty wrong with him. So Martin and Ninian were just as conspicuous as before. But he didn't tip her off. She was grown up; she was supposed to know better than he did.

He lived well. He had food to eat that he'd never dreamed of before, warm clothes that no one had ever worn before him. He was surrounded by more luxury than he knew what to do with.

The furniture was the latest New Grand Rapids African modern. There were tidy, colorful Picasso and Braque prints on the walls. And every inch of the floor was modestly covered by carpeting, though the walls were mostly unabashed glass. There were hot water and heat all the time and a freezer well stocked with food—somewhat erratically chosen, for Ninian didn't know much about meals.

The non-glass part of the house was of neat, natural-toned wood, with a neat green lawn in front and a neat parti-colored garden in back.

Martin missed the old neighborhood, though. He missed having other kids to play with. He even missed his mother. Sure, she hadn't given him enough to eat and she'd beaten him up so hard sometimes that she'd nearly killed him—but then there had also been times when she'd hugged and kissed him and soaked his collar with her tears. She'd done all she could for him, supporting him in the only way she knew how—and if respectable society didn't like it, the hell with respectable society.

From Ninian and her cousins, there was only an impersonal kindness. They made no bones about the fact that they were there only to carry out a rather unpleasant duty. Though they were in the house with him, in their minds and in their talk they were living in another world—a world of warmth and peace and plenty where nobody worked, except in the government service or the essential professions. And they seemed to think even that kind of job was pretty low-class, though better than actually doing anything with the hands.

In their world, Martin came to understand, nobody worked with hands; everything was done by machinery. All the people ever did was wear pretty clothes and have good times and eat all they wanted. There was no devastation, no war, no unhappiness, none of the concomitants of normal living.

It was then that Martin began to realize that either the whole lot of them were insane, or what Ninian had told him at first was the truth. They came from the future.



When Martin was sixteen, Raymond took him aside for the talk Ninian had promised five years before.

"The whole thing's all my brother Conrad's fault. You see, he's an idealist," Raymond explained, pronouncing the last word with distaste.

Martin nodded gravely. He was a quiet boy now, his brief past a dim and rather ridiculous memory. Who could ever imagine him robbing a grocery store or wielding a broken bottle now? He still was rather undersized and he'd read so much that he'd weakened his eyes and had to wear glasses. His face was pallid, because he spent little time in the sun, and his speech rather overbred, his mentors from the future having carefully eradicated all current vulgarities.

"And Conrad really got upset over the way Earth has been exploiting the not so intelligent life-forms on the other planets," Raymond continued. "Which is distressing—though, of course, it's not as if they were people. Besides, the government has been talking about passing laws to do away with the—well, abuses and things like that, and I'm sure someday everything will come out all right. However, Conrad is so impatient."

"I thought, in your world, machines did all the work," Martin suggested.

"I've told you—our world is precisely the same as this one!" Raymond snapped. "We just come a couple of centuries or so later, that's all. But remember, our interests are identical. We're virtually the same people...although it is amazing what a difference two hundred odd years of progress and polish can make in a species, isn't it?"

He continued more mildly: "However, even you ought to be able to understand that we can't make machinery without metal. We need food. All that sort of thing comes from the out-system planets. And, on those worlds, it's far cheaper to use native labor than to ship out all that expensive machinery. After all, if we didn't give the natives jobs, how would they manage to live?"

"How did they live before? Come to think of it, if you don't work, how do *you* live now?... I don't mean in the now for me, but the now for you," Martin explained laboriously. It was so difficult to live in the past and think in the future.

"I'm trying to talk to you as if you were an adult," Raymond said, "but if you will persist in these childish interruptions—"

"I'm sorry," Martin said.

But he wasn't, for by now he had little respect left for any of his descendants. They were all exceedingly handsome and cultivated young people, with superior educations, smooth ways of speaking and considerable self-confidence, but they just weren't very bright. And he

had discovered that Raymond was perhaps the most intelligent of the lot. Somewhere in that relatively short span of time, his line or—more frightening—his race had lost something vital.

Unaware of the near-contempt in which his young ancestor held him, Raymond went on blandly: “Anyhow, Conrad took it upon himself to feel particularly guilty, because, he decided, if it hadn’t been for the fact that our great-grandfather discovered the super-drive, we might never have reached the stars. Which is ridiculous—his feeling guilty, I mean. Perhaps a great-grandfather is responsible for his great-grandchildren, but a great-grandchild can hardly be held accountable for his great-grandfather.”

“How about a great-great-grandchild?” Martin couldn’t help asking.

Raymond flushed a delicate pink. “Do you want to hear the rest of this or don’t you?”

“Oh, I do!” Martin said. He had pieced the whole thing together for himself long since, but he wanted to hear how Raymond would put it.

“Unfortunately, Professor Farkas has just perfected the time transmitter. Those government scientists are so infernally officious—always inventing such senseless things. It’s supposed to be hush-hush, but you know how news will leak out when one is always desperate for a fresh topic of conversation.”

Anyhow, Raymond went on to explain, Conrad had bribed one of Farkas’ assistants for a set of the plans. Conrad’s idea had been to go back in time and “eliminate!” their common great-grandfather. In that way, there would be no space-drive, and, hence, the Terrestrials would never get to the other planets and oppress the local aborigines.

“Sounds like a good way of dealing with the problem,” Martin observed.

Raymond looked annoyed. “It’s the *adolescent* way,” he said, “to do away with it, rather than find a solution. Would you destroy a whole society in order to root out a single injustice?”

“Not if it were a good one otherwise.”

“Well, there’s your answer. Conrad got the apparatus built, or perhaps he built it himself. One doesn’t inquire too closely into such matters. But when it came to the point, Conrad couldn’t bear the idea of eliminating our great-grandfather—because our great-grandfather was such a *good* man, you know.” Raymond’s expressive upper lip curled. “So Conrad decided to go further back still and get rid of his great-grandfather’s father—who’d been, by all accounts, a pretty worthless character.”

“That would be me, I suppose,” Martin said quietly.

Raymond turned a deep rose. “Well, doesn’t that just go to prove you mustn’t believe everything you hear?” The next sentence tumbled out in a rush. “I wormed the whole thing out of him and all of us—the

other cousins and me—held a council of war, as it were, and we decided it was our moral duty to go back in time ourselves and protect you.” He beamed at Martin.

The boy smiled slowly. “Of course. You had to. If Conrad succeeded in *eliminating* me, then none of you would exist, would you?”

Raymond frowned. Then he shrugged cheerfully. “Well, you didn’t really suppose we were going to all this trouble and expense out of sheer altruism, did you?” he asked, turning on the charm which all the cousins possessed to a consternating degree.

\* \* \* \*

Martin had, of course, no illusions on that score; he had learned long ago that nobody did anything for nothing. But saying so was unwise.

“We bribed another set of plans out of another of the professor’s assistants,” Raymond continued, as if Martin had answered, “and—ah—induced a handicraft enthusiast to build the gadget for us.”

*Induced*, Martin knew, could have meant anything from blackmail to the use of the iron maiden.

“Then we were all ready to forestall Conrad. If one of us guarded you night and day, he would never be able to carry out his plot. So we made our counter-plan, set the machine as far back as it would go—and here we are!”

“I see,” Martin said.

Raymond didn’t seem to think he really did. “After all,” he pointed out defensively, “whatever our motives, it has turned into a good thing for you. Nice home, cultured companions, all the contemporary conveniences, plus some handy anachronisms—I don’t see what more you could ask for. You’re getting the best of all possible worlds. Of course Ninian was a ninny to locate in a mercantile suburb where any little thing out of the way will cause talk. How thankful I am that our era has completely disposed of the mercantiles—”

“What did you do with them?” Martin asked.

But Raymond rushed on: “Soon as Ninian goes and I’m in full charge, we’ll get a more isolated place and run it on a far grander scale. Ostentation—that’s the way to live here and now; the richer you are, the more eccentricity you can get away with. And,” he added, “I might as well be as comfortable as possible while I suffer through this wretched historical stint.”

“So Ninian’s going,” said Martin, wondering why the news made him feel curiously desolate. Because, although he supposed he liked her in a remote kind of way, he had no fondness for her—or she, he knew, for him.

“Well, five years is rather a long stretch for any girl to spend in

exile,” Raymond explained, “even though our life spans are a bit longer than yours. Besides, you’re getting too old now to be under petticoat government.” He looked inquisitively at Martin. “You’re not going to go all weepy and make a scene when she leaves, are you?”

“No....” Martin said hesitantly. “Oh, I suppose I will miss her. But we aren’t very close, so it won’t make a real difference.” That was the sad part: he already knew it wouldn’t make a difference.

Raymond clapped him on the shoulder. “I knew you weren’t a sloppy sentimentalist like Conrad. Though you do have rather a look of him, you know.”

Suddenly that seemed to make Conrad real. Martin felt a vague stirring of alarm. He kept his voice composed, however. “How do you plan to protect me when he comes?”

“Well, each one of us is armed to the teeth, of course,” Raymond said with modest pride, displaying something that looked like a child’s combination spaceman’s gun and death ray, but which, Martin had no doubt, was a perfectly genuine—and lethal—weapon. “And we’ve got a rather elaborate burglar alarm system.”

Martin inspected the system and made one or two changes in the wiring which, he felt, would increase its efficiency. But still he was dubious. “Maybe it’ll work on someone coming from outside this *house*, but do you think it will work on someone coming from outside this *time*?”

“Never fear—it has a temporal radius,” Raymond replied. “Factory guarantee and all that.”

“Just to be on the safe side,” Martin said, “I think I’d better have one of those guns, too.”

“A splendid idea!” enthused Raymond. “I was just about to think of that myself!”

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When it came time for the parting, it was Ninian who cried—tears at her own inadequacy, Martin knew, not of sorrow. He was getting skillful at understanding his descendants, far better than they at understanding him. But then they never really tried. Ninian kissed him wetly on the cheek and said she was sure everything would work out all right and that she’d come see him again. She never did, though, except at the very last.

Raymond and Martin moved into a luxurious mansion in a remote area. The site proved a well-chosen one; when the Second Atomic War came, half a dozen years later, they weren’t touched. Martin was never sure whether this had been sheer luck or expert planning. Probably luck, because his descendants were exceedingly inept planners.

Few people in the world then could afford to live as stylishly as Martin and his guardian. The place not only contained every possible convenience and gadget but was crammed with bibelots and antiques, carefully chosen by Raymond and disputed by Martin, for, to the man from the future, all available artifacts were antiques. Otherwise, Martin accepted his new surroundings. His sense of wonder had become dulled by now and the pink pseudo-Spanish castle—"architecturally dreadful, of course," Raymond had said, "but so hilariously typical"—impressed him far less than had the suburban split-level aquarium.

"How about a moat?" Martin suggested when they first came. "It seems to go with a castle."

"Do you think a moat could stop Conrad?" Raymond asked, amused.

"No," Martin smiled, feeling rather silly, "but it would make the place seem safer somehow."

The threat of Conrad was beginning to make him grow more and more nervous. He got Raymond's permission to take two suits of armor that stood in the front hall and present them to a local museum, because several times he fancied he saw them move. He also became an adept with the ray gun and changed the surrounding landscape quite a bit with it, until Raymond warned that this might lead Conrad to them.

During those early years, Martin's tutors were exchanged for the higher-degreed ones that were now needful. The question inevitably arose of what the youth's vocation in that life was going to be. At least twenty of the cousins came back through time to hold one of their vigorous family councils. Martin was still young enough to enjoy such occasions, finding them vastly superior to all other forms of entertainment.

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"This sort of problem wouldn't arise in our day, Martin," Raymond commented as he took his place at the head of the table, "because, unless one specifically feels a call to some profession or other, one just—well, drifts along happily."

"Ours is a wonderful world," Grania sighed at Martin. "I only wish we could take you there. I'm sure you would like it."

"Don't be a fool, Grania!" Raymond snapped. "Well, Martin, have you made up your mind what you want to be?"

Martin affected to think. "A physicist," he said, not without malice. "Or perhaps an engineer."

There was a loud, excited chorus of dissent. He chuckled inwardly.

"Can't do that," Ives said. "Might pick up some concepts from us."

Don't know how; none of us knows a thing about science. But it could happen. Subconscious osmosis, if there is such a thing. That way, you might invent something ahead of time. And the fellow we got the plans from particularly cautioned us against that. Changing history. Dangerous."

"Might mess up our time frightfully," Bartholomew contributed, "though, to be perfectly frank, I can't quite understand how."

"I am not going to sit down and explain the whole thing to you all over again, Bart!" Raymond said impatiently. "Well, Martin?"

"What would you suggest?" Martin asked.

"How about becoming a painter? Art is eternal. And quite gentlemanly. Besides, artists are always expected to be either behind or ahead of their times."

"Furthermore," Ottillie added, "one more artist couldn't make much difference in history. There were so many of them all through the ages."

Martin couldn't hold back his question. "What was I, actually, in that other time?"

There was a chilly silence.

"Let's not talk about it, dear," Lalage finally said. "Let's just be thankful we've saved you from *that*!"

So drawing teachers were engaged and Martin became a very competent second-rate artist. He knew he would never be able to achieve first rank because, even though he was still so young, his work was almost purely intellectual. The only emotion he seemed able to feel was fear—the ever-present fear that someday he would turn a corridor and walk into a man who looked like him—a man who wanted to kill him for the sake of an ideal.

But the fear did not show in Martin's pictures. They were pretty pictures.

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Cousin Ives—now that Martin was older, he was told to call the descendants *cousin*—next assumed guardianship. Ives took his responsibilities more seriously than the others did. He even arranged to have Martin's work shown at an art gallery. The paintings received critical approval, but failed to evoke any enthusiasm. The modest sale they enjoyed was mostly to interior decorators. Museums were not interested.

"Takes time," Ives tried to reassure him. "One day they'll be buying your pictures, Martin. Wait and see."

Ives was the only one of the descendants who seemed to think of Martin as an individual. When his efforts to make contact with the other young man failed, he got worried and decided that what Martin

needed was a change of air and scenery.

“Course you can’t go on the Grand Tour. Your son hasn’t invented space travel yet. But we can go see this world. What’s left of it. Tourists always like ruins best, anyway.”

So he drew on the family’s vast future resources and bought a yacht, which Martin christened *The Interregnum*. They traveled about from sea to ocean and from ocean to sea, touching at various ports and making trips inland. Martin saw the civilized world—mostly in fragments; the nearly intact semi-civilized world and the uncivilized world, much the same as it had been for centuries. It was like visiting an enormous museum; he couldn’t seem to identify with his own time any more.

The other cousins appeared to find the yacht a congenial headquarters, largely because they could spend so much time far away from the contemporary inhabitants of the planet and relax and be themselves. So they never moved back to land. Martin spent the rest of his life on *The Interregnum*. He felt curiously safer from Conrad there, although there was no valid reason why an ocean should stop a traveler through time.

More cousins were in residence at once than ever before, because they came for the ocean voyage. They spent most of their time aboard ship, giving each other parties and playing an *avant-garde* form of shuffleboard and gambling on future sporting events. That last usually ended in a brawl, because one cousin was sure to accuse another of having got advance information about the results.

Martin didn’t care much for their company and associated with them only when not to have done so would have been palpably rude. And, though they were gregarious young people for the most part, they didn’t court his society. He suspected that he made them feel uncomfortable.

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He rather liked Ives, though. Sometimes the two of them would be alone together; then Ives would tell Martin of the future world he had come from. The picture drawn by Raymond and Ninian had not been entirely accurate, Ives admitted. True, there was no war or poverty on Earth proper, but that was because there were only a couple of million people left on the planet. It was an enclave for the highly privileged, highly interbred aristocracy, to which Martin’s descendants belonged by virtue of their distinguished ancestry.

“Rather feudal, isn’t it?” Martin asked.

Ives agreed, adding that the system had, however, been deliberately planned, rather than the result of haphazard natural development. Everything potentially unpleasant, like the mercantiles, had been

deported.

"Not only natives livin' on the other worlds," Ives said as the two of them stood at the ship's rail, surrounded by the limitless expanse of some ocean or other. "People, too. Mostly lower classes, except for officials and things. With wars and want and suffering," he added regretfully, "same as in your day.... Like now, I mean," he corrected himself. "Maybe it is worse, the way Conrad thinks. More planets for us to make trouble on. Three that were habitable aren't any more. Bombed. Very thorough job."

"Oh," Martin murmured, trying to sound shocked, horrified—interested, even.

"Sometimes I'm not altogether sure Conrad was wrong," Ives said, after a pause. "Tried to keep us from getting to the stars, hurting the people—I expect you could call them people—there. Still—" he smiled shamefacedly—"couldn't stand by and see my own way of life destroyed, could I?"

"I suppose not," Martin said.

"Would take moral courage. I don't have it. None of us does, except Conrad, and even he—" Ives looked out over the sea. "Must be a better way out than Conrad's," he said without conviction. "And everything will work out all right in the end. Bound to. No sense to—to anything, if it doesn't." He glanced wistfully at Martin.

"I hope so," said Martin. But he couldn't hope; he couldn't feel; he couldn't even seem to care.

During all this time, Conrad still did not put in an appearance. Martin had gotten to be such a crack shot with the ray pistol that he almost wished his descendant would show up, so there would be some excitement. But he didn't come. And Martin got to thinking....

He always felt that if any of the cousins could have come to realize the basic flaw in the elaborate plan they had concocted, it would have been Ives. However, when the yacht touched at Tierra del Fuego one bitter winter, Ives took a severe chill. They sent for a doctor from the future—one of the descendants who had been eccentric enough to take a medical degree—but he wasn't able to save Ives. The body was buried in the frozen ground at Ushuaia, on the southern tip of the continent, a hundred years or more before the date of his birth.

A great many of the cousins turned up at the simple ceremony. All were dressed in overwhelming black and showed a great deal of grief. Raymond read the burial service, because they didn't dare summon a clerical cousin from the future; they were afraid he might prove rather stuffy about the entire undertaking.

"He died for all of us," Raymond concluded his funeral eulogy over Ives, "so his death was not in vain."

But Martin disagreed.



The ceaseless voyaging began again. *The Interregnum* voyaged to every ocean and every sea. Some were blue and some green and some dun. After a while, Martin couldn't tell one from another. Cousin after cousin came to watch over him and eventually they were as hard for him to tell apart as the different oceans.

All the cousins were young, for, though they came at different times in his life, they had all started out from the same time in theirs. Only the young ones had been included in the venture; they did not trust their elders.

As the years went by, Martin began to lose even his detached interest in the land and its doings. Although the yacht frequently touched port for fuel or supplies—it was more economical to purchase them in that era than to have them shipped from the future—he seldom went ashore, and then only at the urging of a newly assigned cousin anxious to see the sights. Most of the time Martin spent in watching the sea—and sometimes he painted it. There seemed to be a depth to his seascapes that his other work lacked.

When he was pressed by the current cousin to make a land visit somewhere, he decided to exhibit a few of his sea paintings. That way, he could fool himself into thinking that there was some purpose to this journey. He'd come to believe that perhaps what his life lacked was purpose, and for a while he kept looking for meaning everywhere, to the cousin's utter disgust.

"Eat, drink and be merry, or whatever you Romans say when you do as you do," the cousin—who was rather woolly in history; the descendants were scraping bottom now—advised.

Martin showed his work in Italy, so that the cousin could be disillusioned by the current crop of Romans. He found that neither purpose nor malice was enough; he was still immeasurably bored. However, a museum bought two of the paintings. Martin thought of Ives and felt an uncomfortable pang of a sensation he could no longer understand.

"Where do you suppose Conrad has been all this time?" Martin idly asked the current cousin—who was passing as his nephew by now.

The young man jumped, then glanced around him uncomfortably. "Conrad's a very shrewd fellow," he whispered. "He's biding his time—waiting until we're off guard. And then—pow!—he'll attack!"

"Oh, I see," Martin said.

He had often fancied that Conrad would prove to be the most stimulating member of the whole generation. But it seemed unlikely that he would ever have a chance for a conversation with the young man. More than one conversation, anyhow.

"When he does show up, I'll protect you," the cousin vowed,

touching his ray gun. "You haven't a thing to worry about."

Martin smiled with all the charm he'd had nothing to do but acquire. "I have every confidence in you," he told his descendant. He himself had given up carrying a gun long ago.

There was a war in the Northern Hemisphere and so *The Interregnum* voyaged to southern waters. There was a war in the south and they hid out in the Arctic. All the nations became too drained of power—fuel and man and will—to fight, so there was a sterile peace for a long time. *The Interregnum* roamed the seas restlessly, with her load of passengers from the future, plus one bored and aging contemporary. She bore big guns now, because of the ever-present danger of pirates.

\* \* \* \*

Perhaps it was the traditionally bracing effect of sea air—perhaps it was the sheltered life—but Martin lived to be a very old man. He was a hundred and four when his last illness came. It was a great relief when the family doctor, called in again from the future, said there was no hope. Martin didn't think he could have borne another year of life.

All the cousins gathered at the yacht to pay their last respects to their progenitor. He saw Ninian again, after all these years, and Raymond—all the others, dozens of them, thronging around his bed, spilling out of the cabin and into the passageways and out onto the deck, making their usual clamor, even though their voices were hushed.

Only Ives was missing. He'd been the lucky one, Martin knew. He had been spared the tragedy that was going to befall these blooming young people—all the same age as when Martin had last seen them and doomed never to grow any older. Underneath their masks of woe, he could see relief at the thought that at last they were going to be rid of their responsibility. And underneath Martin's death mask lay an impersonal pity for those poor, stupid descendants of his who had blundered so irretrievably.

There was only one face which Martin had never seen before. It wasn't a strange face, however, because Martin had seen one very like it in the looking glass when he was a young man.

"You must be Conrad," Martin called across the cabin in a voice that was still clear. "I've been looking forward to meeting you for some time."

The other cousins whirled to face the newcomer.

"You're too late, Con," Raymond gloated for the whole generation. "He's lived out his life."

"But he hasn't lived out his life," Conrad contradicted. "He's lived out the life *you* created for him. And for yourselves, too."

For the first time, Martin saw compassion in the eyes of one of his lineage and found it vaguely disturbing. It didn't seem to belong there.

"Don't you realize even yet," Conrad went on, "that as soon as he goes, you'll go, too—present, past, future, wherever you are, you'll go up in the air like puffs of smoke?"

"What do you mean?" Ninian quavered, her soft, pretty face alarmed.

Martin answered Conrad's rueful smile, but left the explanations up to him. It was his show, after all.

"Because you will never have existed," Conrad said. "You have no right to existence; it was you yourselves who watched him all the time, so he didn't have a chance to lead a normal life, get married, *have children....*"

\* \* \* \*

Most of the cousins gasped as the truth began to percolate through.

"I knew from the very beginning," Conrad finished, "that I didn't have to do anything at all. I just had to wait and you would destroy yourselves."

"I don't understand," Bartholomew protested, searching the faces of the cousins closest to him. "What does he mean, we have never existed? We're here, aren't we? What—"

"Shut up!" Raymond snapped. He turned on Martin. "You don't seem surprised."

The old man grinned. "I'm not. I figured it all out years ago."

At first, he had wondered what he should do. Would it be better to throw them into a futile panic by telling them or to do nothing? He had decided on the latter; that was the role they had assigned him—to watch and wait and keep out of things—and that was the role he would play.

"You knew all the time and you didn't tell us!" Raymond spluttered. "After we'd been so good to you, making a gentleman out of you instead of a criminal.... That's right," he snarled, "a criminal! An alcoholic, a thief, a derelict! How do you like that?"

"Sounds like a rich, full life," Martin said wistfully.

What an exciting existence they must have done him out of! But then, he couldn't help thinking, he—he and Conrad together, of course—had done them out of *any* kind of existence. It wasn't his responsibility, though; he had done nothing but let matters take whatever course was destined for them. If only he could be sure that it was the better course, perhaps he wouldn't feel that nagging sense of guilt inside him. Strange—where, in his hermetic life, could he possibly have developed such a queer thing as a conscience?

"Then we've wasted all this time," Ninian sobbed, "all this energy,

all this money, for nothing!”

“But you were nothing to begin with,” Martin told them. And then, after a pause, he added, “I only wish I could be sure there had been some purpose to this.”

He didn’t know whether it was approaching death that dimmed his sight, or whether the frightened crowd that pressed around him was growing shadowy.

“I wish I could feel that some good had been done in letting you be wiped out of existence,” he went on voicing his thoughts. “But I know that the same thing that happened to your worlds and my world will happen all over again. To other people, in other times, but again. It’s bound to happen. There isn’t any hope for humanity.”

One man couldn’t really change the course of human history, he told himself. Two men, that was—one real, one a shadow.

Conrad came close to the old man’s bed. He was almost transparent.

“No,” he said, “there is hope. They didn’t know the time transmitter works two ways. I used it for going into the past only once—just this once. But I’ve gone into the future with it many times. And—” he pressed Martin’s hand—“believe me, what I did—what we did, you and I—serves a purpose. It will change things for the better. Everything is going to be all right.”

\* \* \* \*

Was Conrad telling him the truth, Martin wondered, or was he just giving the conventional reassurance to the dying? More than that, was he trying to convince himself that what he had done was the right thing? Every cousin had assured Martin that things were going to be all right.

Was Conrad *actually* different from the rest?

His plan had worked and the others’ hadn’t, but then all his plan had consisted of was doing nothing. That was all he and Martin had done...nothing. Were they absolved of all responsibility merely because they had stood aside and taken advantage of the others’ weaknesses?

“Why,” Martin said to himself, “in a sense, it could be said that I have fulfilled my original destiny—that I am a criminal.”

Well, it didn’t matter; whatever happened, no one could hold him to blame. He held no stake in the future that was to come. It was other men’s future—other men’s problem. He died very peacefully then, and, since he was the only one left on the ship, there was nobody to bury him.

The unmanned yacht drifted about the seas for years and gave rise to many legends, none of them as unbelievable as the truth.

# UNCOMMON CASTAWAY, by Nelson S. Bond

Originally published in *Avon Fantasy Reader*, October, 1949.

*Heed Ye! 'Ware and repent, I cry, and woe to him who will not hear my warning! For verily I say unto you that the Day of Judgment neareth, when for your sins and your iniquities shall be visited upon you the fire and the sword of Those whose fury maketh the earth to tremble; yea, the very sea to burn!*

\* \* \* \*

They shooed us out of Alexandria when Rommel pressed past Mersa Matruh and down the long sandy highway that leads to Cair. Shooed us, but fast. The Admiralty said there was nothing we *could* do but hide out in safe harbors until events disclosed whether Montgomery's plan for a last-ditch stand at a dot on the map called El Alamein was sound strategy or—as almost everyone feared—pure desperation.

The Old Man hated like blazes to run. When I handed him the order, he grunted and his teeth met through his pipestem. He didn't even swear—which just proves how deeply he was moved, because the skipper is an educated man. He cusses fluently in six languages. At trifles.

But this was too big. He just shook his head and said, "Very good, Sparks. Carry on!" And turned and walked forward, very fast.

So the *Grampus*, under cover of a jet Egyptian night, slipped out to sea and safety. The West Harbor was like a coal pit; even the lighthouse on Raset-Tin was blacked out. But the darkness was alive with sounds. The incessant wash of Mediterranean waters against the crags of Pharos...the high, flat notes of a bosun's key, piping-thin against the sigh of a westering breeze...the mute ripple of voices from ships that glided dimly past, cheerless as drifting wraiths. Gray sounds, angry sounds. The petulant farewell of vessels evacuating a harbor that had been, but a few short months ago, Britain's proudest base along the North African coast.

"We're to be first out," the Old Man told us. "The fleet will need every sub. Particularly if the Jerries take Alex." He added, glancing skyward speculatively, "The deck guns will be manned. There may be trouble."

But there wasn't. We didn't lose a single ship or a single man to the enemy action throughout the operation. Funny, too, because we were

fish in a barrel for the Stukas. Jammed in the bottleneck too tightly to offer effective resistance, and many of us in foul shape. Like the *Grampus*, which had put in for G.O. and repairs, and got her sailing orders before the job was half finished.

But maybe it wasn't so strange after all. The Germans were pretty cocky in those days. And I suppose they had reason to be. But their very cockiness was our salvation. I think they didn't bomb us during our flight simply because they expected to take Alexandria any day, and didn't want to move into a shattered naval base.

Anyhow, we cleared the breakwater without a sign of trouble, and were under way. We weren't told where we were going, but since our course was due nor'east, it was clear to every man aboard that Larnaca was our goal. Cyprus, a mere three hundred sea miles away, should have been a snap day's journey, but no one was starry-eyed enough to think we'd make it that quickly. There was, for one thing, the constant possibility of encountering enemy craft, aerial or sea-borne. Moreover, a dropping glass warned of weather ahead. And to further louse up an already gloomy picture, our spit-and-prayer-patched engines started coughing and spluttering even before we cleared Pharos' light.

Auld Rory, our cook, didn't like the situation, and said as much when I braced him for a cup of tea in the galley after we were safely out to sea.

"'Tis a verra bad business, this," growled the old Scot, "'Tisna richt for a navvy to roon awa', wi'oot even makin a fight fo't. 'Tisna"—he scowled, fumbling for the word he wanted—"tisna deegnified!"

I grinned and told him, "Maybe not, Rory, but it's a lot healthier. As Shakespeare says in *Paradise Lost*, He who fights and pulls his freight, will live to fight some other date."

"The noble Bard," gritted Auld Rory savagely, "didna write *Paradise Lost*. Twas the great John Milton. Nor is the verse as ye've misquoted it, ignorant Yank that ye are!"

"I've told you a thousand times, Rory," I chuckled, "that I'm not an American. I'm British subject, born and diapered in dear old Fogville-on-the-Thames."

"Your words make ye a liar!" flared Auld Rory. "Ye speak the mither tongue as if it had na feyther."

"That," I said, "is because I grew up in Brooklyn."

"Oh? Ye told me once New York."

"A suburb of Brooklyn. You must come with me to Flatbush one day, Rory. Quite a place. You ought to hear the Ladies' Day crowds at Ebbets Field yelling at the umpires. Moider dat bum! Give him de woiks—"

"Bum!" gasped Rory, outraged. "Wi' ladies present? 'Tis indecent.

I'm ashamed o' ye, Jake Levine!" He brooded darkly as I sipped my tea. "And I still say this is a bad business. In the harbor, at least we had shore batteries and a deefensive position. But that wasna gude eno' for the brass. No! So here we are, alone and limpin' in the middle o' the gory Mediterranean, prey to God knows what yon rascals will send to plague us! 'Tis a wonder we ha' na already been attacked, that it is."

"Calm down, Rory," I laughed, "and give your ulcers a rest. These waters are reasonably safe. Bet you five bob we don't even sight an enemy, let alone... Hey!"

What a prophet! My forecast ended in a startled yelp as the unmistakable *gurr-oom!* of a deck gun shuddered through the ship. The *Grampus* bucked and quivered. Tea scalded my wrists. Voices rose in excited query, and were lost in the strident clamor of the ship's alarm system.

And over it all: "I'll take that bet!" bawled Auld Rory.

I broke from the galley and raced toward the radio room. Weaving through the passageway, I met members of the gun crew scurrying from topside to their submersion posts. I grabbed Rob Enslow's arm.

"Planes?"

"The bloody sky's full of 'em!"

I heard their motors now, droning with the fretful tumult of a broken wasps' nest. The Jerries had not wanted to blast us in harbor, but were coming out to catch us in open sea. The Old Man's clipped, unhurried voice was oddly reassuring.

"All hands, stand by! Rig for diving!" The valves opened, the wheeze of escaping air mingled with the gurgle of ballast water, and we nosed under. I reached my compartment and lurched to the instrument panel. Walt Roberts, ship's yeoman, was there. He glanced up.

"You all right, Jake?"

"Sure," I said. "You?"

"Top hole." Then, after a moment: "We're under."

I nodded. "Yeah. We'll be okay now, unless some of those big babies carry depth bombs."

"That's so," said Walt. "But maybe they didn't this time."

"Probably not," I decided. "It must be a land-based flight, out of Bardia. I'll bet there's not a depth bomb in the lot of them..."

Or that's what I *started* to say. I don't know if I ever finished the sentence or not.

For suddenly there sounded a dull booming roar. The *Grampus* jerked as though struck by a monstrous fist.

Then it seemed to shake itself and leap, like a sailfish fighting the hook. Again the alarm bell dinned—then stopped abruptly as the

lights flared to brief, eye-searing brightness and went out. A hot tingling pulsation, like electricity gone mad, flowed through and twisted me in knots. The *Grampus* tilted, my feet flew out from under me, and I slid head first across the slanting deck. My head struck the bulkhead. That's all I remember...

The umpire bawled, "Stuh-rike!" I jumped to my feet, roaring fury shared by a bleachers full of fellow townsmen.

"Go get glasses, you bum!" I hollered. "That ball was a mile outside!"

I picked up my cushion and spun it onto the diamond. A hand fell on my shoulder, and a park cop glared at me malevolently. "Okay, you! Come wit' me!"

I said, "Get your hands off me!" and struggled to shake myself free. Someone—a friend in the crowd—cried from a distance, "Jake? Are you all right, Jake?"

"Let go!" I snarled. "This is a free country! Let go, before I—"

The hand clutching my shoulder tightened. The voice drew nearer and clearer. "Jake? Are you all right, Jake?" Ebbets Field faded; its sun-drenched bleachers became the lightless, dank interior of the *Grampus*. The hand and voice belonged to Walt Roberts. "Jake—"

"Okay," I said. "I'm okay, Walt." I craned my neck gingerly. "Thanks, pal. You just saved me from ten bucks or ten days."

"Eh?"

"Skip it," I said. "Where are we?"

"On the bottom. That depth charge did something to us—I don't know exactly what. Fortunately it's not so deep here."

"That's swell," I said. "That's perfectly ducky!" I was scared spitless, but I wasn't going to let him know it.

"If we were fish, we wouldn't have far to go. Are we taking water?"

"No. Apparently not."

"Then what's wrong with the batteries? How come no lights?"

"I wouldn't know," said Roberts.

"Well, let's go see," I suggested.

We felt our way through the ship, and met others doing the same thing. There was tenseness, but no panic. And don't get the idea that discipline had been relaxed, just because we were allowed to do what we wanted. It was just that the Old Man has brains, as well as braid. He knew how everyone felt, and so long as no one got in the engineer's way, he allowed us to satisfy our curiosity.

There were emergency lamps in the engine room, and a sweating corps straining over the motors. The chief engineer was not so worried as frankly bewildered.

"Oddest thing I ever saw, sir," I heard him tell the Old Man. "It's



not just concussion damage, or a short. It's as if the whole electrical unit had been picked up and—and *twisted* out of shape, somehow."

"That's the way it felt," grunted the skipper. "The ship seemed to writhe and wriggle like an eel."

"Yes, sir. The bus bars are a solid lump. And the wiring—"

The chief shook his head.

"But you can fix it?"

"I think so, sir. Yes, I'm sure we can."

"Very good. Carry on!" The Old Man turned quietly to the rest of us. "You heard the chief, lads. Now you know as much as we do. Let's all go to our stations, and let these men work."

So we did, and that was that. Sometime later, the lights flickered on again. After another long, hopeful wait we heard the tentative hum of the diesels, followed by the throb of a turning shaft. Then the skipper's voice over the com system: "All hands, attention. All clear. We're taking her up."

It was broad daylight when, after making certain no enemy craft were in the vicinity, the *Grampus* surfaced. We were under a blanket of radio silence, of course, but in the hope of sighting a friendly vessel, the skipper told me to get my flags and come along topside with him.

That fresh air sure smelled good, and the sun felt good, too. But we'd lost the other ships in our convoy—if you'd call it that. The horizon was clear as far as the eye could reach. Not a dot on the water.

No, there was *one* dot. The Old Man spotted it before any of us leveled his binoculars on the dancing black fleck and grunted thoughtfully.

"A man—on a raft, or a spar. A survivor, perhaps. I imagine one of the ships didn't get off as lightly as we did." He sighed. "Bring her about, mister. We'll pick him up."

The second saluted and ducked below. A few minutes later, we hove within hailing distance of the derelict.

Now, here's where the wacky part of my story comes in. You'd think that survivor should have been tickled pink to see us, wouldn't you? Would have waved and yelled at us?

But not this lunkhead! For the longest time, he didn't even seem to see us. Or if he did, he tried to let on like he didn't. He wouldn't answer our calls, though we must have been within hearing range.

"Deaf?" wondered the skipper aloud.

"Possibly, sir," said the second. "But he must *see* us. He could at least call for help."

"Deaf and dumb?" offered the skipper.

"Or," I suggested, "just plain dumb, sir?" Because at this moment

the man definitely saw us. He rose from his awkward kneeling posture, but instead of waving his arms, or part of the tattered rags in which he was clad, the damn fool loosed a hoarse cry of alarm, leaped off his rickety old raft, and started flailing away from us as fast as his skinny arms would carry him.

The Old Man grunted understanding. "Oh, now I see! An enemy. Very good! Fetch him aboard, lads!"

So we did. But we had to knock him unconscious to do it. Two of the seamen went into the briny after him. Catching him was like wrestling a barracuda. He kicked and bit and clawed, and almost scratched one of Bill Ovens's eyes out. That made Bill a bit peevish, so while his comrade grappled with the guy, face to face, Bill slipped up aft and let him have it behind the ear.

And the *Grampus* had picked up a passenger.

\* \* \* \*

Some time later, when I was telling Walt about the fracas, the Old Man buzzed me.

"Levine? Would you step forward, please?"

I found him waiting for me before the compartment in which our passenger had been locked. He took his pipe from his mouth and stared at me thoughtfully.

"Levine, you're Jewish, aren't you?"

"Why, yes, sir."

"Orthodox?"

I said, "No, sir. My mother and dad are, but I—"

"No matter," he said. "Listen!"

He nodded toward the door. From within came sounds—the voice of our passenger talking to himself in a high, thin, rising-and-falling whine. Syllables emerged from the patter, and made sense. A word here and there, a phrase.

"Why," I said, "that's Hebrew!"

"That's what I thought," said the Old Man. "Can you speak it?"

"I can understand it," I said. "Most of it, anyway. I speak Yiddish better."

"Good!" grunted the skipper. "Come in here."

He ushered me before him into the compartment. For the first time I got a real look at our unwilling guest. He was a queer-looking duck. Lean and hot and angry-looking, with great smoldering eyes that made you want to crawl when he turned them on you. Not with fear or disgust. With something else. I don't know just what it was. A sort of—well awe, maybe. That's the closest I can come to it. A feeling that if you didn't watch your step, something pretty terrible was going to happen to you.

He had coal-black hair to match his eyes, and wore a straggly beard that accentuated rather than minimized the acid-bitter thinness of his lips. His high cheekbones had a consumptive flush, and his nostrils were pinched.

He looked like someone I'd seen once, somewhere, but couldn't remember who it was, or where, or when.

His chanting wail stopped abruptly when we entered, and he cringed, frightened but defiant. Like a trapped animal, I thought.

The skipper said, "Speak to him, Jake."

I said, "Hyah, pal!"

"In Hebrew."

"Oh!" I said, and took a whack at it. It was heavy going, because I'd forgotten a lot. I said, "Greetings! My name is Levine, Jacob Levine. Can you understand what I am saying?"

Could he! His sultry eyes lighted, and he burst into a torrent of words.

"What is he saying?" asked the skipper.

"Too much," I complained, "and too fast," I said in Hebrew. "You must speak more slowly."

He cut his motors a few hundred thousand r.p.m., and at a more moderate tempo I began to catch his drift. He was, he declared, a humble man, and we were the mighty ones whom he feared. He was too meek and miserable a mortal to be the victim of our wrath. He kissed our feet and begged that he be freed. If we loosed him, he would sing our praise forever.

"Well?" asked the Old Man.

"Sweet talk," I said. "He's scared stiff."

"What's his name?"

I passed along the query, and got a tongueful of polysyllables that would have sunk a freighter. It was one of those old-fashioned family-tree monickers-so-and-so, son of so-and-so, son of somebody else, ad infinitum. When I tried to pass it along to the Old Man, he shrugged.

"Tell him we'll call him Johnny for short. Where did he come from? Was he on one of the evacuation ships?"

No, he had been on a merchantman.

Had his ship been sunk in last night's raid?

Raid? He had seen no raid, neither last night nor any night. He was a humble man, unworthy of our attentions. He wished but to be freed...

Then where *had* he come from? What was his ship, and where had it sailed from? Whither bound?

I relayed his answer to the Old Man. "His ship was the *Warrior King*, Tarshish, bound out of Joppa with a cargo of salt, wine and linens."

“Joppa?” frowned the skipper. “That would be Jaffa, near Jerusalem. But Tarshish? Perhaps he means Tarsus, in Turkey? But that’s not a seaport. Oh, well, it doesn’t matter. How long has he been floating around on that raft?”

“Three days,” I learned from our passenger.

“Then he wasn’t shipwrecked last night. Is your wireless working, Sparks?”

“To tell you the truth, sir, I don’t know. Everything’s happened so fast, and we’ve been under silence—”

“Yes, of course. Well, get it working and contact Lamaca for an index report on the—what was it?—Warrior King. If the registry is Allied or neutral, I suppose this old fellow is harmless.”

“Yes, sir,” I said. “Right away, sir.”

“Oh, and before you go, tell our friend he’s in no danger. That we’re not going to eat him.” The Old Man chuckled.

I translated the message. The results were—well, astonishing, to say the least! Old whiskers loosed a little bleat of gratitude, then hopped up from his squat and hurled himself at the Old Man’s feet, bowing and slobbering as if the skipper were on a pedestal or something.

The Old Man backed away, startled and embarrassed.

“I say, old chap! You needn’t be so blasted...look out! Careful, there! Oh, *damn it!* Damn it all!”

He glared fretfully at his right hand, bleeding from a long and nasty gash. Retreating from Johnny, he’d snagged it on a bolthead and ripped it open from forefinger to wrist. He clamped a handkerchief to the cut, swearing magnificently.

“Lock him in again, Sparks. I’ve got to take this to the medico. Carry on!” And he left.

I said to Johnny savagely, “Now, see? You caused that!”

I expected a torrent of apologies and denials, but I was wrong. Johnny just stood there, his lips ashen, his eyes bleak and haunted. He whispered mournfully, “Yes... I know. I know...”

Well, I went to the radio room and warmed up the tubes. Then confidently, because a quick examination indicated everything to be shipshape, I twisted the verniers to see who was saying what on which cycles.

Nothing happened.

I got my tools and went trouble-shooting. I found one loose connection and a condenser that didn’t test right. I fixed these, and tried again.

Nothing happened.

I tried the transmitter. It seemed to work. I rigged up a playback and crosschecked. Nothing wrong there. So I got out my blueprints

and went over the whole set from aerial to ground, making any minor adjustments that seemed necessary. Then I tried once more.

And drew a blank.

I went to the skipper. I said, "I don't understand it, sir. If I were getting nothing at all, it would prove there's something wrong with the set. But I *am* picking up static, so the receivers operating. But I can't pick up any broadcasts, long or short wave."

The Old Man was mighty nice about it. "Don't worry about it, Sparks," he said. "It's probably something rather unusual, connected with our crash dive. Just keep working on it."

"But I can't raise Larnaca, sir."

"No matter. We'll be there in the morning. We'll make inquiries when we get there. By the way, you'll mess with me tonight."

I gulped. "*Me*, sir?"

The Old Man smiled. "Yes. I'm having Johnny as my guest, and I want you to act as interpreter. Will you?"

"Yes, *sir!*" I said.

"Johnny's on his way here now. I asked the second to go and fetch him. We'll—Good Lord, what's that?"

"That" was a series of thudding bumps just outside, followed by a sharp, agonized cry, then moans. We were out the door in a flash. The second lay groaning at the bottom of the companionway, his left leg doubled queerly under him. Johnny, standing over him, was wringing his hands and wailing frantic self-recriminations.

"It was my fault. I did it. I did it."

"Langdon!" cried the Old Man. "What happened?"

From between teeth clenched with pain came the answer. "I don't—know, sir. I must have slipped on the last step. It's my leg, sir."

"Did that man shove you?" I cried angrily.

"No. Of course not. It was just an accident."

But Johnny's stricken moaning did not cease. "It was my fault," he cried over and over. "I did it. I..."

\* \* \* \*

From now on, I can't explain the rest of my story. All I can do is tell it, and let you write your own ticket. It's strange. It's mad. It's impossible. But...

We arrived at Cyprus in the morning. And I put it that way deliberately. The skipper had said we would reach Larnaca in the morning, but we didn't. We reached the spot where Larnaca should have been. And it wasn't there! That doesn't make sense? It didn't make sense to us, either. It was a fine, bright, sunny morning. When we eased into the rounded harbor that should have been jammed with refugee ships, should have been aglitter with all the panoply and

bustle of a British naval base, we stared incredulously at a narrow strip of beach rimmed by a few dilapidated fishing shacks.

Four of us were topside—the skipper, the third, Johnny and myself. When we stared into that yawning, desolate basin, the third cried uncomprehendingly. “But—there’s something wrong. I *can’t* have made a mistake, sir!”

The Old Man took the sextant from the third’s hands. He shot the blazing sun with painstaking care. Then he stood for a long moment, gnawing his lips, his eyes gray and distant. Finally, “Mr. Graves?” he said.

“Yes, sir?”

“You will change our course, please. We are going to the mainland.”

“Yes, sir. Right away, sir.”

The mate vanished below, obviously relieved that he had been spared a dressing-down. I said hesitantly, “Are we very far from Larnaca, sir?”

The Old Man said in a curious, strained voice. “I don’t know, Sparks. Possibly *you* can tell *me*. Which is the farther—a million miles, or a million years?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand, sir.”

“No,” he said slowly. “Nor I.”

“But you said something about the mainland?”

“Yes. We’re going to land our passenger back where he belongs. That much, if nothing else.”

“How long will it take, sir? A couple of hours?”

“I wish to God it would,” said the Old Man tightly, “but I fear not. When did we pick up Johnny?”

“Why, yesterday morning, sir.”

“Exactly,” sighed the skipper. “So it will take us two days to reach the mainland.”

To tell the truth, I thought the Old Man had slipped his moorings. The Lebanse mainland is not more than five hours from the island of Cyprus. But the skipper was right! It took us two full, nerve-wracking days to reach a coast we should have made easily before sundown.

First the motors conked out. Then, when the chief got them turning again, the electrical system went haywire. Generators spitting and sparking like firecrackers, for no apparent reason. When that was repaired, one of the bulkheads started oozing suspicious drops, and we had to heave to and jury-rig patches before the leak got worse.

Those were the major difficulties. There were more minor ones than I can enumerate. Working on the damaged motors, one of the engineering crew lost half a finger. One of the oilers came down with a fever—a malarial fever, for Pete’s sake, smack in the middle of an

inland sea! Then something whipped up for mess by Auld Rory must have come from a tainted tin, for on the second morning half the crew turned green and started upchucking all over the place.

Oh, it was a sweet voyage! Bad luck seemed to have taken over the *Grampus* in a big way.

Somehow, my private luck held, except for the fact that our passenger, finally recovered from his initial fear, had turned into a human question box. From morning to night he pounded my ear with questions. What was this vessel upon which we traveled, he wanted to know, this wondrous vessel which rode at will on or below the waters?

It was a submarine, I told him.

A submarine? And what was a submarine?

The *Grampus*, I told him. The *Grampus* was a submarine. Now go sit in the corner and croon lullabies, Pop!

Aie, what marvels! The *Grampus* was a submarine. So be it! But what was a grampus?

I knew the answer to that one, too, having looked it up in an encyclopedia when I was assigned to the ship.

"A grampus," I said, "is a type of dolphin, sometimes known as the killer whale because of its fighting habits and deadliness. Not a bad name for this crate, Pop. We've done a bit of killing already, and we'll do more, as soon as we get patched up for another crack at the Nazis."

He said solemnly, "You make war upon the evil ones?"

"You can say that again," I told him grimly. "They think they've got us licked, but we've just begun to fight. Our day is coming—and soon."

He wanted to know what we fought with, then, and I got a chance to show him, because this quiz program went on during one of the blowtorch-and-hammer sessions, and the Old Man had decided to let the gun crew fire a few trial bursts while we were hove to, just to keep their hands in. With his permission, I took old Johnny topside to watch.

He stared, with sagging jaw, as they stripped the gun and loaded it. And when it fired, belching a gout of flame amidst a roar of thunder, he practically went out of his head. He cut for the rail, and if I hadn't clutched his tattered nightgown, he'd have been back in the drink again, only without a raft.

Anyhow, that quenched his curiosity. He was glad to get back to his own quarters and stay there. Which gave me an opportunity to work some more on my incomprehensibly mute receiver.

I was going over my circuits for the 'teenth time when the skipper wandered in and stood there watching quietly. At last he said, "No luck, eh, Sparks?"

“Skipper,” I said flatly, “there’s *no* luck aboard this ship any more. Here or elsewhere.”

“I know what you mean, Jake,” he nodded. “It’s almost as if we were hoo-dooed, isn’t it? Jinxed?”

“It is, sir. I’m not superstitious, but—”

“Nor am I,” said the skipper, “but I’m curious. I wonder if...Sparks, you’ve studied electrical transmission. Tell me something, will you? Just what is electricity?”

I shook my head. “I’m sorry, sir. Nobody can tell you that. No one knows.”

“Electronics,” mused the Old Man. “In the theory of electronics, isn’t there something about electrons being in two different places simultaneously?”

I said slowly, “I remember something sir, vaguely. Niles Bohr, I think. An electron moving from one cycle to another without ever having been in the space between. But I never could understand it, and I never tried. I’m no scientist. I just work with the equipment the smart guys invent.” I stared at him. “But why do you ask, sir? Is it—”

“Just curious,” repeated the skipper. “Perhaps the answer lies there, somehow. But it doesn’t matter. We can’t do anything about it. Just wait and see what we find when we reach the mainland.”

“But I don’t understand, sir,” I said. “What are you expecting to find?”

But he didn’t answer me. He just stood there in the doorway sucking at his cold pipe, staring through me off into space. On the morning of the fifth day after our flight from Alex, we sighted the mainland. It was a dull, gray, nasty morning, lowering with thick blankets of black cumulus that threatened to split at the seams any moment. The dim roll of thunder growled threat of a storm to come as once again the skipper, Johnny and I stood on the weather deck. There were two seamen, too, waiting till the Old Man should give the expected orders.

“Well,” said the skipper, “this is it. In a few minutes we’ll be as close in as we dare go. Then we’ll put him ashore, Sparks.”

I said, “But didn’t the third set course for Beyrouth, sir?”

“Yes.”

“There are docks there. We won’t have to lay off shore, sir.”

“Really?” The Old Man gave me a faint smile. “I wonder, Sparks. I hope you’re right, but—” he gestured, as briefly the dark overcast lifted, giving us a glimpse of the shoreline we approached—“but, you see, you’re wrong.”

It was Larnaca all over again. There was no naval base at Beyrouth, but I knew it to be a modern Near Eastern metropolis, doubly astir nowadays with war activity. And the drowsy little village



I beheld was far from modern. No building on its shoreline was more than one story in height, the few ships in its inlet were shallow-draft wooden vessels of single-span canvas or none.

I said, "Skipper, I think I know what's wrong now. There's only one possible explanation. Your sextant's gone haywire, that's the trouble—"

"No," said the Old Man, "there's another explanation. Don't you see, Sparks? Don't you see?" Then, shrugging as I just stared at him blankly: "Ah, well! Let's not delay. Tell Johnny Goodbye for me, will you?"

I turned to the old geezer, who had been watching the coast draw nearer with a kindling tenseness in his gaze. I touched his skinny shoulder, and he started.

"Well, Johnny, this is it. We're putting you off now."

He nodded. "So be it. I am yours to command."

"Anything else, sir?" I asked the skipper.

"Nothing else, Sparks. What is to be, will be."

I turned to Johnny. "I guess that's all," I said. "Except a private word on my own hook, Pop. The skipper's sure you're okay, or he wouldn't be turning you loose this way. I don't know, myself. We don't know whether you came off a friendly or an enemy ship. And you've had the run of the *Grampus* for three days. You've seen a lot more than a civilian's supposed to see."

"I am a meek and miserable servant," said Johnny, slipping into the old routine of formal, stilted phraseology, "unworthy of the wonders that have been shown me—"

"Yeah, I know. And you're a gone goose if you go back and spill what you've learned. Understand? We know who you are, and if you turn out to be on *their* side, we'll come and get you. Is that clear?"

Johnny's strange, fanatic eyes gleamed. "I hear and obey," he said strongly. "So be it, I gird my loins to battle the forces of evil by your side."

"Okay," I said. "Then—so long, and good luck!"

I gave him my hand to shake, but the idiot didn't. Instead, he crouched and kissed it. I yanked it away, embarrassed, glancing at the skipper swiftly. But the Old Man simply sighed and nodded, almost as if that were what he expected. He spoke to the snickering seamen. "Very well, lads."

They lifted Johnny into the inflated raft we were scooting him off in, and shoved him off. The sea was high and choppy. The Old Man nodded. "Oil, lads." The boys broke loose a canister, smoothing a patch around the *Grampus* and the life raft. Johnny moved away slowly, and we watched him go until the skipper said abruptly, "It's raining, lads. We'd better go below." The first fat drops of rain turned

swiftly to a driving sheet as we ran to the tower. The closing hatch dulled the rumbling drums of thunder. The Old Man frowned.

"Sad old beggar! I hope he makes it to shore before he's waterlogged!"

He moved to the periscope, cranked it around to cover Johnny's passage.

"Can you see him, sir?" I asked. "Is he—"

"He's made it. He's landing now. I see people... God!"

The Old Man shouted, covered his eyes with his hands, and fell away from the periscope blindly. I cried, "What is it, sir? What—"

Then my voice caught in my throat, even as I put out a hand. For the *Grampus* was humming...yes, *humming!*...with a wild outré cacophony of sound unlike anything I've ever heard. A weird tingling burned through my veins, and black vertigo danced before my eyes. I couldn't breathe; I couldn't stir. I seemed to be rising...falling...turning...dropping through unfathomable depths of burning blackness to a screaming emptiness...

As suddenly as it had started, it ended. And the Old Man's voice was croaking in my ear.

"God! Sparks, are you all right?"

"Yes, sir," I faltered. "I think so, sir. What was it? What happened?"

"Lightning. A direct smash, forward. I thought for a moment it had blinded me. Look!"

He gestured to the eyepiece of the periscope. I looked—and drew back. The sea about us was in flames from the lightning burst igniting the oil. I suddenly remembered Johnny. I said, "The poor old bloke! He must think we've been burned to a crisp."

"Or," said the skipper, "that we disappeared in a sea of flame."

I gaped at him stupidly.

"Look again, Sparks. Beyond the fire. The shore."

I looked. The flames were gone. The storm clouds had vanished, and the sky was crystal blue. There was a patrol-ship racing toward us, a bone of froth in its teeth, the Union Jack astern. White, modern buildings rimmed a harbor abristle with docks and quays, the glory of a modern seaport. The city was Beyrouth!

I said, "But—but I don't understand, sir! How did we get here?"

The Old Man said, quietly, "When the patrol arrives, Sparks, I will tell them we had trouble and drifted off our course. I dare not tell them the truth. They'd never understand. No more than you do—or I do."

"Understand what, sir?"

"Where we have been," said the Old Man, "or when. I'm not sure I can explain, Sparks. Perhaps there's a clear and logical explanation.

Possibly you were right about the sextant; we misjudged our position off Cyprus. And maybe we were all insensible for a few minutes after that lightning struck the ship. I don't know. Maybe we've been laying off this harbor for an hour."

"But the village we saw?"

"Dimly, through a brief rift in the fog. There is such a thing as a mirage."

I said, "You don't really believe that, sir. You're just rationalizing."

He groped for his pipe and pouch, steadying shaken nerves with old, familiar movements. "Yes, Sparks, I am. Logic rejects what I *really* believe."

"And that is, sir?"

"Suppose electricity were somehow connected with time? Then what?"

"With *time*, sir?"

"The present and the past," mused the Old Man, "and the future. Days and hours leaping like electrons from one place to another, without ever having passed through intervening space. A bomb scored a near miss on the *Grampus*, and everything was strangely changed. Lightning struck us—and we have returned to our proper era."

"You mean we've been in the—"

"The past—yes." The skipper's pipe was lighted now, and with its indrawn fragrance he relaxed. He smiled at me. "It does make sense that way, Jake. If I were a better Christian and you a better Jew, we might have understood earlier. Think! Doesn't our passenger remind you of anyone?"

"He always did," I acknowledged. "From the moment I first laid eyes on him. But I can't seem to—wait a minute! Now I remember. An old rabbi I knew when I was a kid. A fiery old man, like an ancient prophet."

"Your wireless worked, but received nothing. Suppose there was nothing to receive?"

"Skipper, I—"

"There was a man," said the skipper softly, "who set forth from Joppa to Tarshish to escape the service of the Lord. But where he traveled, punishment pursued him. And his shipmates rose against him, casting him adrift..."

The small hairs tingled on my neck, and a coldness crept up my spine. I was remembering the stories now—the old, old stories told by taper-light, and the liquid cadence of the cantor's voice.

The skipper said, "Three days, Jake. He was three days our passenger aboard the *Grampus*. And you told him what a grampus is."

"His name?" I whispered.

"We called him Johnny," sighed the skipper. "The nearest English

equivalent to the first part of his long name. But his real name, Sparks, was...”

\* \* \* \*

*Heed ye! Ware and repent, I cry, and sue Their mercy ere it be too late;  
this do I bid and warn. For I have dwelt amongst Them; mine eyes have  
seen with awe Their strength and righteous anger. These have I seen; yea,  
even I...Jonah of Gathhephur, prophet of the Lord!*

# OF ALL POSSIBLE WORLDS, by William Tenn

Originally published in *Galaxy Science Fiction*, December 1956.

It was a good job and Max Alben knew whom he had to thank for it—his great-grandfather.

“Good old Giovanni Albeni,” he muttered as he hurried into the laboratory slightly ahead of the escorting technicians, all of them, despite the excitement of the moment, remembering to bob their heads deferentially at the half-dozen full-fleshed and hard-faced men lolling on the couches that had been set up around the time machine.

He shrugged rapidly out of his rags, as he had been instructed in the anteroom, and stepped into the housing of the enormous mechanism. This was the first time he had seen it, since he had been taught how to operate it on a dummy model, and now he stared at the great transparent coils and the susurrating energy bubble with much respect.

This machine, the pride and the hope of 2089, was something almost outside his powers of comprehension. But Max Alben knew how to run it, and he knew, roughly, what it was supposed to accomplish. He knew also that this was the first backward journey of any great duration and, being scientifically unpredictable, might well be the death of him.

“Good old Giovanni Albeni,” he muttered again affectionately.

If his great-grandfather had not volunteered for the earliest time-travel experiments way back in the nineteen-seventies, back even before the Blight, it would never have been discovered that he and his seed possessed a great deal of immunity to extra-temporal blackout.

And if that had not been discovered, the ruling powers of Earth, more than a century later, would never have plucked Max Alben out of an obscure civil-service job as a relief guard at the North American Chicken Reservation to his present heroic and remunerative eminence. He would still be patrolling the barbed wire that surrounded the three white leghorn hens and two roosters—about one-sixth of the known livestock wealth of the Western Hemisphere—thoroughly content with the half-pail of dried apricots he received each and every payday.

No, if his great-grandfather had not demonstrated long ago his unique capacity for remaining conscious during time travel, Max Alben would not now be shifting from foot to foot in a physics laboratory, facing the black market kings of the world and awaiting their final instructions with an uncertain and submissive grin.

Men like O'Hara, who controlled mushrooms, Levney, the blackberry tycoon, Sorgasso, the packaged-worm monopolist—would black marketeers of their tremendous stature so much as waste a glance on someone like Alben ordinarily, let alone confer a lifetime pension on his wife and five children of a full spoonful each of non-synthetic sugar a day?

Even if he didn't come back, his family was provided for like almost no other family on Earth. This was a damn good job and he was lucky.

Alben noticed that Abd Sadha had risen from the straight chair at the far side of the room and was approaching him with a sealed metal cylinder in one hand.

"We've decided to add a further precaution at the last moment," the old man said. "That is, the scientists have suggested it and I have—er—I have given my approval."

The last remark was added with a slight questioning note as the Secretary-General of the United Nations looked back rapidly at the black market princes on the couches behind him. Since they stared back stonily, but offered no objection, he coughed in relief and returned to Alben.

"I am sure, young man, that I don't have to go into the details of your instructions once more. You enter the time machine and go back the duration for which it has been preset, a hundred and thirteen years, to the moment after the Guided Missile of 1976 was launched. It is 1976, isn't it?" he asked, suddenly uncertain.

"Yes, sir," one of the technicians standing by the time machine said respectfully. "The experiment with an atomic warhead guided missile that resulted in the Blight was conducted on this site on April 18, 1976." He glanced proudly at the unemotional men on the couches, very much like a small boy after completing a recitation before visiting dignitaries from the Board of Education.

"Just so." Abd Sadha nodded. "April 18, 1976. And on this site. You see, young man, you will materialize at the very moment and on the very spot where the remote-control station handling the missile was—er—handling the missile. You will be in a superb position, a superb position, to deflect the missile in its downward course and alter human history for the better. Very much for the better. Yes."

He paused, having evidently stumbled out of his thought sequence.

"And he pulls the red switch toward him," Gomez, the dandelion-root magnate, reminded him sharply, impatiently.

"Ah, yes, the red switch. He pulls the little red switch toward him. Thank you, Mr. Gomez, thank you very much, sir. He pulls the little red switch on the green instrument panel toward him, thus preventing the error that caused the missile to explode in the Brazilian jungle and causing it, instead, to explode somewhere in the mid-Pacific, as

originally planned.”

The Secretary-General of the United Nations beamed. “Thus preventing the Blight, making it nonexistent, as it were, producing a present-day world in which the Blight never occurred. That is correct, is it not, gentlemen?” he asked, turning anxiously again.

None of the half-dozen men on couches deigned to answer him. And Alben kept his eyes deferentially in their direction, too, as he had throughout this period of last-minute instruction.

He knew who ruled his world—these stolid, well-fed men in clean garments with a minimum of patches, and where patches occurred, at least they were the color of the surrounding cloth.

Sadha might be Secretary-General of the United Nations, but that was still a civil-service job, only a few social notches higher than a chicken guard. His clothes were fully as ragged, fully as multi-colored, as those that Alben had stepped out of. And the gnawing in his stomach was no doubt almost as great.

“You understand, do you not, young man, that if anything goes wrong,” Abd Sadha asked, his head nodding tremulously and anticipating the answer, “if anything unexpected, unprepared-for, occurs, you are not to continue with the experiment but return immediately?”

“He understands everything he has to understand,” Gomez told him. “Let’s get this thing moving.”

The old man smiled again. “Yes. Of course, Mr. Gomez.” He came up to where Alben stood in the entrance of the time machine and handed the sealed metal cylinder to him. “This is the precaution the scientists have just added. When you arrive at your destination, just before materializing, you will release it into the surrounding temporal medium. Our purpose here, as you no doubt—”

Levney sat up on his couch and snapped his fingers peremptorily. “I just heard Gomez tell you to get this thing moving, Sadha. And it isn’t moving. We’re busy men. We’ve wasted enough time.”

“I was just trying to explain a crucial final fact,” the Secretary-General apologized. “A fact which may be highly—”

“You’ve explained enough facts.” Levney turned to the man inside the time machine. “Hey, fella. You. *Move!*”

Max Alben gulped and nodded violently. He darted to the rear of the machine and turned the dial which activated it.

*flick!*

It was a good job and Mac Albin knew whom he had to thank for it—his great-grandfather.

“Good old Giovanni Albeni,” he laughed as he looked at the morose faces of his two colleagues. Bob Skeat and Hugo Honek had done as

much as he to build the tiny time machine in the secret lab under the helicopter garage, and they were fully as eager to go, but—unfortunately for them—they were not descended from the right ancestor.

Leisurely, he unzipped the richly embroidered garment that, as the father of two children, he was privileged to wear, and wriggled into the housing of the complex little mechanism. This was hardly the first time he had seen it, since he'd been helping to build the device from the moment Honek had nodded and risen from the drafting board, and now he barely wasted a glance on the thumb-size translucent coils growing out of the almost microscopic energy bubbles which powered them.

This machine was the last hope, of 2089, even if the world of 2089, as a whole, did not know of its existence and would try to prevent its being put into operation. But it meant a lot more to Mac Albin than merely saving a world. It meant an adventurous mission with the risk of death.

“Good old Giovanni Albeni,” he laughed again happily.

If his great-grandfather had not volunteered for the earliest time-travel experiments way back in the nineteen-seventies, back even before the Epidemic, it would never have been discovered that he and his seed possessed a great deal of immunity to extra-temporal blackout.

And if that had not been discovered, the Albins would not have become physicists upon the passage of the United Nations law that everyone on Earth—absolutely without exception—had to choose a branch of research science in which to specialize. In the flabby, careful, life-guarding world the Earth had become, Mac Albin would never have been reluctantly selected by his two co-workers as the one to carry the forbidden banner of dangerous experiment.

No, if his great-grandfather had not demonstrated long ago his unique capacity for remaining conscious during time travel, Mac Albin would probably be a biologist today like almost everyone else on Earth, laboriously working out dreary gene problems instead of embarking on the greatest adventure Man had known to date.

Even if he didn't come back, he had at last found a socially useful escape from genetic responsibility to humanity in general and his own family in particular. This was a damn good job and he was lucky.

“Wait a minute, Mac,” Skeat said and crossed to the other side of the narrow laboratory.

Albin and Honek watched him stuff several sheets of paper into a small metal box which he closed without locking.

“You will take care of yourself, won't you, Mac?” Hugo Honek pleaded. “Any time you feel like taking an unnecessary risk, remember



that Bob and I will have to stand trial if you don't come back. We might be sentenced to complete loss of professional status and spend the rest of our lives supervising robot factories."

"Oh, it won't be that bad," Albin reassured him absent-mindedly from where he lay contorted inside the time machine. He watched Skeat coming toward him with the box.

Honek shrugged his shoulders. "It might be a lot worse than even that and you know it. The disappearance of a two-time father is going to leave an awful big vacancy in the world. One-timers, like Bob and me, are all over the place; if either of us dropped out of sight, it wouldn't cause nearly as much uproar."

"But Bob and you both tried to operate the machine," Albin reminded him. "And you blacked out after a fifteen-second temporal displacement. So I'm the only chance, the only way to stop the human race from dwindling and dwindling till it hits absolute zero, like that fat old Security Council seems willing for it to do."

"Take it easy, Mac," Bob Skeat said as he handed the metal box to Albin. "The Security Council is just trying to solve the problem in their way, the conservative way: a worldwide concentration on genetics research coupled with the maximum preservation of existing human lives, especially those that have a high reproductive potential. We three disagree with them; we've been skulking down here nights to solve it our way, and ours is a radical approach and plenty risky. That's the reason for the metal box—trying to cover one more explosive possibility."

Albin turned it around curiously. "How?"

"I sat up all last night writing the manuscript that's inside it. Look, Mac, when you go back to the Guided Missile Experiment of 1976 and push that red switch away from you, a lot of other things are going to happen than just deflecting the missile so that it will explode in the Brazilian jungle instead of the Pacific Ocean."

"Sure. I know. If it explodes in the jungle, the Epidemic doesn't occur. No Shapiro's Mumps."

Skeat jiggled his pudgy little face impatiently. "That's not what I mean. The Epidemic doesn't occur, but something else does. A new world, a different 2089, an alternate time sequence. It'll be a world in which humanity has a better chance to survive, but it'll be one with problems of its own. Maybe tough problems. Maybe the problems will be tough enough so that they'll get the same idea we did and try to go back to the same point in time to change them."

Albin laughed. "That's just looking for trouble."

"Maybe it is, but that's my job. Hugo's the designer of the time machine and you're the operator, but I'm the theoretical man in this research team. It's my job to look for trouble. So, just in case, I wrote

a brief history of the world from the time the missile exploded in the Pacific. It tells why ours is the worst possible of futures. It's in that box."

"What do I do with it—hand it to the guy from the alternate 2089?"

The small fat man exasperatedly hit the side of the time machine with a well-cushioned palm. "You know better. There won't be any alternate 2089 until you push that red switch on the green instrument panel. The moment you do, our world, with all its slow slide to extinction, goes out and its alternate goes on—just like two electric light bulbs on a push-pull circuit. We and every single one of our artifacts, including the time machine, disappear. The problem is how to keep that manuscript from disappearing.

"Well, all you do, if I have this figured right, is shove the metal box containing the manuscript out into the surrounding temporal medium a moment before you materialize to do your job. That temporal medium in which you'll be traveling is something that exists independent of and autonomous to all possible futures. It's my hunch that something that's immersed in it will not be altered by a new time sequence."

"Remind him to be careful, Bob," Honek rumbled. "He thinks he's Captain Blood and this is his big chance to run away to sea and become a swashbuckling pirate."

Albin grimaced in annoyance. "I am excited by doing something besides sitting in a safe little corner working out safe little abstractions for the first time in my life. But I know that this is a first experiment. Honestly, Hugo, I really have enough intelligence to recognize that simple fact. I know that if anything unexpected pops up, anything we didn't foresee, I'm supposed to come scuttling back and ask for advice."

"I hope you do," Bob Skeat sighed. "I hope you do know that. A twentieth century poet once wrote something to the effect that the world will end not with a bang, but a whimper. Well, our world is ending with a whimper. Try to see that it doesn't end with a bang, either."

"That I'll promise you," Albin said a trifle disgustedly. "It'll end with neither a bang nor a whimper. So long, Hugo. So long, Bob."

He twisted around, reaching overhead for the lever which activated the forces that drove the time machine.

*flick!*

It was strange, Max Alben reflected, that this time travel business, which knocked unconscious everyone who tried it, only made him feel slightly dizzy. That was because he was descended from Giovanni Albeni, he had been told. There must be some complicated scientific

explanation for it, he decided—and that would make it none of his business. Better forget about it.

All around the time machine, there was a heavy gray murk in which objects were hinted at rather than stated definitely. It reminded him of patrolling his beat at the North American Chicken Reservation in a thick fog.

According to his gauges, he was now in 1976. He cut speed until he hit the last day of April, then cut speed again, drifting slowly backward to the eighteenth, the day of the infamous Guided Missile Experiment. Carefully, carefully, like a man handling a strange bomb made on a strange planet, he watched the center gauge until the needle came to rest against the thin etched line that indicated the exactly crucial moment. Then he pulled the brake and stopped the machine dead.

All he had to do now was materialize in the right spot, flash out and pull the red switch toward him. Then his well-paid assignment would be done.

But....

He stopped and scratched his dirt-matted hair. Wasn't there something he was supposed to do a second before materialization? Yes, that useless old windbag, Sadha, had given him a last instruction.

He picked up the sealed metal cylinder, walked to the entrance of the time machine and tossed it into the gray murk. A solid object floating near the entrance caught his eye. He put his arm out—whew, it was cold!—and pulled it inside.

A small metal box. Funny. What was it doing out there? Curiously, he opened it, hoping to find something valuable. Nothing but a few sheets of paper, Alben noted disappointedly. He began to read them slowly, very slowly, for the manuscript was full of a lot of long and complicated words, like a letter from one bookworm scientist to another.

The problems all began with the Guided Missile Experiment of 1976, he read. There had been a number of such experiments, but it was the one of 1976 that finally did the damage the biologists had been warning about. The missile with its deadly warhead exploded in the Pacific Ocean as planned, the physicists and the military men went home to study their notes, and the world shivered once more over the approaching war and tried to forget about it.

But there was fallout, a radioactive rain several hundred miles to the north, and a small fishing fleet got thoroughly soaked by it. Fortunately, the radioactivity in the rain was sufficiently low to do little obvious physical damage: All it did was cause a mutation in the mumps virus that several of the men in the fleet were incubating at the time, having caught it from the children of the fishing town,

among whom a minor epidemic was raging.

The fleet returned to its home town, which promptly came down with the new kind of mumps. Dr. Llewellyn Shapiro, the only physician in town, was the first man to note that, while the symptoms of this disease were substantially milder than those of its unmutated parent, practically no one was immune to it and its effects on human reproductivity were truly terrible. Most people were completely sterilized by it. The rest were rendered much less capable of fathering or bearing offspring.

Shapiro's Mumps spread over the entire planet in the next few decades. It leaped across every quarantine erected; for a long time, it successfully defied all the vaccines and serums attempted against it. Then, when a vaccine was finally perfected, humanity discovered to its dismay that its generative powers had been permanently and fundamentally impaired.

Something had happened to the germ plasm. A large percentage of individuals were born sterile, and, of those who were not, one child was usually the most that could be expected, a two-child parent being quite rare and a three-child parent almost unknown.

Strict eugenic control was instituted by the Security Council of the United Nations so that fertile men and women would not be wasted upon non-fertile mates. Fertility was the most important avenue to social status, and right after it came successful genetic research.

Genetic research had the very best minds prodded into it; the lesser ones went into the other sciences. Everyone on Earth was engaged in some form of scientific research to some extent. Since the population was now so limited in proportion to the great resources available, all physical labor had long been done by robots. The government saw to it that everybody had an ample supply of goods and, in return, asked only that they experiment without any risk to their own lives—every human being was now a much-prized, highly guarded rarity.

There were less than a hundred thousand of them, well below the danger point, it had been estimated, where a species might be wiped out by a new calamity. Not that another calamity would be needed. Since the end of the Epidemic, the birth rate had been moving further and further behind the death rate. In another century....

That was why a desperate and secret attempt to alter the past was being made. This kind of world was evidently impossible.

Max Alben finished the manuscript and sighed. What a wonderful world! What a comfortable place to live!

He walked to the rear dials and began the process of materializing at the crucial moment on April 18, 1976.

*flick!*

It was odd, Mac Albin reflected, that these temporal journeys, which induced coma in everyone who tried it, only made him feel slightly dizzy. That was because he was descended from Giovanni Albeni, he knew. Maybe there was some genetic relationship with his above-average fertility—might be a good idea to mention the idea to a biologist or two when he returned. If he returned.

All around the time machine, there was a soupy gray murk in which objects were hinted at rather than stated definitely. It reminded him of the problems of landing a helicopter in a thick fog when the robot butler had not been told to turn on the ground lights.

According to the insulated register, he was now in 1976. He lowered speed until he registered April, then maneuvered slowly backward through time to the eighteenth, the day of the infamous Guided Missile Experiment. Carefully, carefully, like an obstetrician supervising surgical robots at an unusually difficult birth, he watched the register until it rolled to rest against the notch that indicated the exactly crucial moment. Then he pushed a button and froze the machine where it was.

All he had to do now was materialize in the right spot, flash out and push the red switch from him. Then his exciting adventure would be over.

But....

He paused and tapped at his sleek chin. He was supposed to do something a second before materialization. Yes, that nervous theoretician, Bob Skeat, had given him a last suggestion.

He picked up the small metal box, twisted around to face the opening of the time machine and dropped it into the gray murk. A solid object floating near the opening attracted his attention. He shot his arm out—it was cold, as cold as they had figured—and pulled the object inside.

A sealed metal cylinder. Strange. What was it doing out there? Anxiously, he opened it, not daring to believe he'd find a document inside. Yes, that was exactly what it was, he saw excitedly. He began to read it rapidly, very rapidly, as if it were a newly published paper on neutrinos. Besides, the manuscript was written with almost painful simplicity, like a textbook composed by a stuffy pedagogue for the use of morons.

The problems all began with the Guided Missile Experiment of 1976, he read. There had been a number of such experiments, but it was the one of 1976 that finally did the damage the biologists had been warning about. The missile with its deadly warhead exploded in the Brazilian jungle through some absolutely unforgivable error in the remote-control station, the officer in charge of the station was reprimanded and the men under him court-martialed, and the

Brazilian government was paid a handsome compensation for the damage.

But there had been more damage than anyone knew at the time. A plant virus, similar to the tobacco mosaic, had mutated under the impact of radioactivity. Five years later, it burst out of the jungle and completely wiped out every last rice plant on Earth. Japan and a large part of Asia became semi-deserts inhabited by a few struggling nomads.

Then the virus adjusted to wheat and corn—and famine howled in every street of the planet. All attempts by botanists to control the Blight failed because of the swiftness of its onslaught. And after it had fed, it hit again at a new plant and another and another.

Most of the world's non-human mammals had been slaughtered for food long before they could starve to death. Many insects, too, before they became extinct at the loss of their edible plants, served to assuage hunger to some small extent.

But the nutritive potential of Earth was steadily diminishing in a horrifying geometric progression. Recently, it had been observed, plankton—the tiny organism on which most of the sea's ecology was based—had started to disappear, and with its diminution, dead fish had begun to pile up on the beaches.

Mankind had lunged out desperately in all directions in an effort to survive, but nothing had worked for any length of time. Even the other planets of the Solar System, which had been reached and explored at a tremendous cost in remaining resources, had yielded no edible vegetation. Synthetics had failed to fill the prodigious gap.

In the midst of the sharply increasing hunger, social controls had pretty much dissolved. Pathetic attempts at rationing still continued, but black markets became the only markets, and black marketeers the barons of life. Starvation took the hindmost, and only the most agile economically lived in comparative comfort. Law and order were had only by those who could afford to pay for them and children of impoverished families were sold on the open market for a bit of food.

But the Blight was still adjusting to new plants and the food supply kept shrinking. In another century....

That was why the planet's powerful individuals had been persuaded to pool their wealth in a desperate attempt to alter the past. This kind of world was manifestly impossible.

Mac Albin finished the document and sighed. What a magnificent world! What an exciting place to live!

He dropped his hand on the side levers and began the process of materializing at the crucial moment on April 18, 1976.

*flick!*

As the equipment of the remote-control station began to take on a blurred reality all around him, Max Alben felt a bit of fear at what he was doing. The technicians, he remembered, the Secretary-General, even the black market kings, had all warned him not to go ahead with his instructions if anything unusual turned up. That was an awful lot of power to disobey: he knew he should return with this new information and let better minds work on it.

They with their easy lives, what did they know what existence had been like for such as he? Hunger, always hunger, scrabbling, servility, and more hunger. Every time things got really tight, you and your wife looking sideways at your kids and wondering which of them would bring the best price. Buying security for them, as he was now, at the risk of his life.

But in this other world, this other 2089, there was a state that took care of you and that treasured your children. A man like himself, with five children—why, he'd be a big man, maybe the biggest man on Earth! And he'd have robots to work for him and lots of food. Above all, lots and lots of food.

He'd even be a scientist—*everyone* was a scientist there, weren't they?—and he'd have a big laboratory all to himself. This other world had its troubles, but it was a lot nicer place than where he'd come from. He wouldn't return. He'd go through with it.

The fear left him and, for the first time in his life, Max Alben felt the sensation of power.

He materialized the time machine around the green instrument panel, sweating a bit at the sight of the roomful of military figures, despite the technicians' reassurances that all this would be happening too fast to be visible. He saw the single red switch pointing upward on the instrument panel. The switch that controlled the course of the missile. Now! Now to make a halfway decent world!

Max Alben pulled the little red switch toward him.

*flick!*

As the equipment of the remote-control station began to oscillate into reality all around him, Mac Albin felt a bit of shame at what he was doing. He'd promised Bob and Hugo to drop the experiment at any stage if a new factor showed up. He knew he should go back with this new information and have all three of them kick it around.

But what would they be able to tell him, they with their blissful adjustment to their thoroughly blueprinted lives? They, at least, had been ordered to marry women they could live with; he'd drawn a female with whom he was completely incompatible in any but a genetic sense. Genetics! He was tired of genetics and the sanctity of human life, tired to the tip of his uncalled fingers, tired to the

recesses of his unused muscles. He was tired of having to undertake a simple adventure like a thief in the night.

But in this other world, this other 2089, someone like himself would be a monarch of the black market, a suzerain of chaos, making his own rules, taking his own women. So what if the weaklings, those unfit to carry on the race, went to the wall? His kind wouldn't.

He'd formed a pretty good idea of the kind of men who ruled that other world, from the document in the sealed metal cylinder. The black marketeers had not even read it. Why, the fools had obviously been duped by the technicians into permitting the experiment; they had not grasped the idea that an alternate time track would mean their own non-existence.

This other world had its troubles, but it was certainly a livelier place than where he'd come from. It deserved a chance. Yes, that was how he felt: his world was drowsily moribund; this alternate was starving but managing to flail away at destiny. It *deserved* a chance.

Albin decided that he was experiencing renunciation and felt proud.

He materialized the time machine around the green instrument panel, disregarding the roomful of military figures since he knew they could not see him. The single red switch pointed downward on the instrument panel. That was the gimmick that controlled the course of the missile. Now! Now to make a halfway interesting world!

Mac Albin pushed the little red switch from him.

*flick!*

Now! Now to make a halfway decent world!

Max Alben pulled the little red switch toward him.

*flick!*

Now! Now to make a halfway interesting world!

Mac Albin pushed the little red switch from him.

*flick!*

...pulled the little red switch toward him.

*flick!*

...pushed the little red switch from him.

*flick!*

...toward him.

*flick!*

...from him.

*flick!*



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